The Sealed Trunk

Henry Kitchell Webster

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THE SEALED TRUNK

BY HENRY KITCHELL WEBSTER

THE REAL ADVENTURE
THE PAINTED SCENE
THE THOROUGHBRED
AN AMERICAN FAMILY
MARY WOLLASTON
REAL LIFE
JOSEPH GREER AND HIS DAUGHTER
THE OTHER SIDE
THE INNOCENTS
THE CORBIN NECKLACE
PHILOPENA
THE BEGINNERS
THE CLOCK STRIKES TWO
THE QUARTZ EYE

The Sealed Trunk

By

HENRY KITCHELL WEBSTER

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UNDER THE TITLE *Rhoda*

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CHAPTER I

RED HAIR

THE first moment was complicated, and, being the first, is probably worth disentangling. Afterward, when there was time to think, Martin Forbes went back to it himself.

It had been perfectly involuntary, his smiling at the girl like that. It wasn't the sort of thing he did, to hang around on the edge of the floor of a public dance-hall and smile into the eyes of strange girls, no matter how pretty they were nor how well they danced.

He had come to the Alhambra to-night at the suggestion of Babe Jennings. She was going to be there, she said, and if she gave him the high sign, he was to take it as permission to cut in on her partner and dance with her. Martin took a partly professional interest in Babe. She had a very good job on his paper as an ad-taker, but she had an avocation which he was given

to understand was even more lucrative. She was, more or less, on the staff of the Alhambra. She was what might be called a professional nice girl.

Men in pursuit of vice didn't come to the Alhambra. It wasn't that sort of place. But lots of men did come who wanted a girl to dance with and take out to supper; a girl whose deportment, though not prim, would still reflect credit upon her companion; a girl who, if she liked you, wouldn't mind your holding her hand in a taxi as you took her home, nor your kissing her good night when you got her there. Well, Babe was one of the girls who supplied this demand. There was, of course, no published tariff of fees, but one accepted tips. Sometimes these were small; Martin was invited to marvel at what pikers some people were. Yet, on the other hand . . . Well, after making the customary discount from all Babe's statements of this sort, one arrived at something rather better than twenty-five dollars a week as her average figure.

To the fiction writer, which Martin meant to be, she ought to prove a mine of variegated raw material. Even for his present job she was worth cultivating, he thought. His specialty was feature stories. Sometimes the city editor sent him out on assignments, but mostly they let him alone to pick things up for himself. He

hadn't known whether or not Babe had anything special in mind in suggesting that he drop around at the Alhambra to-night, but he didn't much care. He had a hunch that he was going to pick up some sort of story between now and bedtime.

At the moment, however, he wasn't thinking about his story. He was wondering vaguely whether he hadn't discovered a new law of physics. Was your repulsion to the man you saw a pretty girl dancing with directly proportionate to your attraction to the girl?

He had been honestly enjoying the girl from his first glimpse of her, from her curly red hair to her perfectly delightful legs. He expected to enjoy her face when she turned so that he could see it. Pending that opportunity he glanced up at her partner, and instantly disliked him. But was it, he wondered, a really intrinsic dislike; or merely a function, so to speak, of the attraction he felt to the girl?

There was nothing glaringly wrong about the bird. He might be something less than forty. He had a meaty-looking face, with a complacent smile on it, and his dress was a bit foppish. He danced well, but you could see he felt he was giving the little girl a treat. No, there was no law about it. Martin would have hated him anywhere.

Just as the music stopped they turned so that he could see the girl's face, and, in sheer pleased surprise, he smiled at her; involuntarily, as has been mentioned. But it was like a head-on collision, for her look met his absolutely true. There was a substratum of smile about it, but above that there was a sort of half-serious desperation that had reference, Martin was sure, to the man she'd been dancing with.

"Want to be rescued?" Martin asked, safely enough, since she stood twenty paces off and he didn't, of course, speak the words aloud.

But, exactly as if she'd heard him, she perceptibly nodded her head and then looked up at her partner who had spoken to her.

"Leap the instant you've looked," was one of Martin's mottoes, and he set himself in motion across the floor to where she stood without pausing to wonder whether he hadn't imagined that nod, or what the consequences would be if he had. The queerest thing about it was the apparently idiotic thing he found he was saying to himself as he approached. "But I didn't know *she* had red hair." There was shuffled up from somewhere in the back of his mind a picture of her in one of those little round Basque caps that artists and tennis players sometimes wear—a béret; that was the name

of it. Had he ever seen her before? Was that why he had smiled at her? Well, he was in for it now.

He touched her companion on the arm—a very solid arm—and said, "May I cut in?"

From the way they both flashed around upon him you'd have said he'd surprised them equally. But in her face, which was the only one he looked at, there dawned a delighted recognition that would have convinced anybody.

"I thought I saw you just a minute ago," she said. Then, to the man she was abandoning, "You'll excuse us, won't you? It's literally forever since we've had a dance together."

Forbes felt himself wearing an indecently broad grin as he danced away with her over that "literally forever" of hers. She had told the blighter the exact truth!

"I didn't know anything like this could happen," he said, after they'd danced in silence about half-way around the floor, "and I don't know yet how it did happen. It's more like a perfectly gorgeous dream than anything else."

"Don't wake up, then," she said.

It was an easy injunction to obey. Whether she was a perfect dancer for all the world or had been

specially created for him, he didn't know. He might consider it later, but it wasn't worth speculating about now. Neither of them spoke again until the long dance was finally over; not even during the pauses when by swelling the applause they encouraged the orchestra to keep on going. It was an excellent orchestra and the floor was faultless. There were lighting effects: rosy dusks, moonlight, sunrises, to all of which they were oblivious. They merely danced.

When, disengaged, they stood looking at each other he said, almost reverently, "Gosh!" and her faintly audible sigh expressed the same thing. Walking beside her off the floor, young Forbes was grappling with the question, "What next?" but he hadn't found an answer when they reached the step-up at the edge. It wasn't until the girl announced her solution by holding out a hand to him and saying, "That was lovely! Thank you very much," that he really woke up.

"Do you have to go back?" he protested. "—To him, I mean."

"To Mr. Lewis? No; I don't have to go back to anybody." She smiled faintly as she said that.

He was thrown out of his stride for a second by a pleasant perception that she knew how to pronounce the name "Lewis."

"Well then, why . . . !" he began, when he got on the rails again.

"Just because you were kind enough to ask me if I didn't want to be rescued," she explained, "it doesn't follow that you've taken me on indefinitely. Haven't you anybody to go back to?"

He laughed. "Not a soul," he told her. "Let's go up to one of those boxes in the balcony and get a soda or something."

Her wants in the way of refreshment were modest. A glass of root beer was the only thing she'd have.

She'd given him enough surprises and enigmas to keep him guessing for hours, but there was one queer thing that he could speak to her about.

"It was a funny coincidence," he remarked, "your saying, as you did just now, that I had asked you if you didn't want to be rescued, because that was exactly what I did ask. I mean, those very words."

"Well," she innocently questioned, "why not?"

"Because I didn't say it to you at all. I was standing sixty feet away from you. I said it to myself."

"You really said it, though, didn't just think it."

"That's the whole point," he insisted impatiently. "You knew what I meant, but how did you know exactly what I said?"

"Telepathy," she told him; but she said it with a grin.

Sensitiveness isn't supposed to be a characteristic of reporters, but Martin Forbes, who was a very good reporter indeed, had it to an unusual degree. It had been an unmitigated curse during his earlier years in the profession, but he'd finally learned to use it. It enabled him to see now, though the girl's manner was still perfectly friendly, that she didn't want to be pressed for the real explanation, if there were one, of her having hit upon the exact phrase he'd used when he spoke to her from half-way across the hall. She didn't want, he perceived, any opening wedges driven for personal questions.

She'd leaned forward a little to watch the crowd on the floor, but just as his gaze followed hers, she suddenly drew back into the shadows of the box. The reason was plain enough. The man he'd rescued her from—Lewis, if that was his name—was coming across the floor. Martin drew back too.

"Do people's names ever strike you as misfits?" he asked. "His does. My idea of a man named Lewis doesn't look like that."

"It may not be his real name," she remarked. "Or he may have changed it from something else. People

do sometimes. All I know is that that's the way one of those men in white trousers introduced him to me. He asked me to call him Max, but I don't know whether that's short for Maxwell, or Maxfield, or Maximilian, or whether it's his whole name."

He couldn't be sure in the dim light of the box, but he thought she'd colored over this admission that she was indebted to one of the floor managers for a dancing partner. He'd resolved not to try to think her out until afterward, but it was a resolution he couldn't keep. Who was she? What was she?

She wasn't a professional "nice girl" like Babe Jennings. Babe would never have abandoned as good a prospect as Lewis, nor would she have ordered anything as cheap as root beer. Babe would have begun in two minutes telling anybody who would listen the story of her life. Babe wouldn't have flushed over the floor manager's introduction. Yet she wouldn't, on the other hand, he thought, have been quite comfortable and unapologetic, as this girl was, if she'd let a man unintroduced by any one dance away with her. No, this girl lived in a different world altogether from Babe's, he was certain of that much anyhow.

He smiled at the echo of her fine speech in his mind's ear: "Maxwell, or Maxfield, or Maximilian."

"There come the orchestra," he said. "Let's go down and dance again."

Just then—they'd moved to leave the box, but even the girl wasn't yet out in the corridor—he saw Babe Jennings coming along with a client in tow, and he got a fleeting notion that some sportive Olympian was having fun with him. For the one thing he'd decided he was certain about concerning his own companion was instantly demolished.

Babe said to her, with sisterly familiarity, "Hello, Red! You through with that box?"

His girl—"Red," indeed!—answered in a perfectly matter-of-fact way, "Yes, come in. We're going to dance."

It wasn't until then that Babe recognized him. "Hello, Marty!" she said, in lively surprise. "I've been looking around for you. But I didn't know you two knew each other."

His companion smiled. "We don't," she admitted. "We picked each other up in the middle of the last dance."

"I wish," Martin put in, "that you'd be good enough to introduce us."

It amused him to see that Babe was shocked. "Miss White," she said with cold formality, "let me introduce

Mr. Forbes." She added, as she turned away to summon her companion who had been hanging in the background, that she liked some people's nerve!

Babe's disapproval of their manners advanced their acquaintance another step. As they moved off together arm in arm, he was aware that Red—no, damn it, he wouldn't even think of her as "Red"! Red White! What a name!—that she, then, was as much amused over Babe's attitude as he was. She didn't say anything about it. She wasn't a talkative sort of girl. He was well content with life as they resumed dancing. His earlier conviction about her was restored. No matter how well she knew Babe, they lived in different worlds just the same.

He said to her as they danced, "I don't like that name: Babe Jennings's nickname for you."

She smiled good-naturedly. "Red? Why not? It fits."

"That's just what it doesn't," he insisted. "I want a better name than that to think of you by. I wish you'd tell me your real one."

She looked rather searchingly into his face for a moment before she answered, but the decision she'd hesitated over was in his favor. "You may not like my real name either," she said. "It's Rhoda. You don't

like it, do you? Or if you do," she went on, overriding the protest he made, "what made you look so funny when I told you?"

He didn't try to deny that he might have looked funny. "I've got some association with the name that I can't spot. I'm sure I don't know anybody named Rhoda. But the name's been in my mind within the last three days."

"Well, don't try to find it now," she admonished him. "You don't dance as well when you think."

So for the next few minutes they dispensed with thinking altogether. They allowed themselves, indeed, to become a little too oblivious to their surroundings. In the next pause, as they stood waiting for the orchestra to go on, Martin saw a flicker of a frown cross the girl's eyebrows and the next instant a voice said at his elbow, "May I have the rest of this dance?"—a rather scared voice; it wouldn't be Lewis's, anyhow—and he turned to see a blushing eager youngster who'd cut in on him.

Annoying as the intrusion was, Martin couldn't help liking the girl better for her kindliness in putting the shy boy at his ease. She introduced him to Martin—Higgins, his name was—and danced away with him. It pleased Martin, though, to observe that he danced badly.

He left the floor and made for a vacant sofa, a low, high-backed, overstuffed thing, one of a pair that stood back to back thwartwise in the side corridor. Its fellow had, he noted, for its solitary tenant a girl whose aggressive blondeness made a really focused glance necessary to satisfy him that she wasn't Babe Jennings. Reassured on that point he dropped into the vacant seat behind her. But he'd hardly begun thinking about Rhoda when his attention was sharply diverted. He felt a jar as somebody heavy sat down beside the woman on the other sofa, and heard him say to her, "Well, you were right. She's the girl."

"Where is she now?" The woman spoke low but her voice had an edge that made it carry.

"Out on the floor. She can't see us here. Trust her to dance when there's music going. She's some dancer, I'll say that. Well, I guess I've beaten the old man to it this time."

"You?" the woman questioned ironically.

"Oh, that was a good hunch you had," he admitted.

The woman's comment was a contemptuous laugh.

Martin, interested without knowing why, found that by turning his head sidewise so that his ear pressed against the back of the sofa he could hear better. The woman was speaking now in a more conciliatory manner.

"Tell me how you made sure. I suppose you got her to tell you the whole story of her life."

"I made a pretty fair start with her," he said complacently. "She's a cagey little brat, though, and I didn't want to press too hard. I'll get more next time. But I found out her first name, and it fits."

"Kept her own first name, did she?" the woman said. "She's the one, then. I was practically sure when I saw her."

"She didn't see you, did she?"

"Not a chance. She was turning in here and I was going by on the sidewalk."

"I guess it's all right," the man said. "It won't do any harm, though, if I try to find out some more about her."

The woman uttered another short unpleasant laugh. "You listen here, Max," she said. "You've got just one job to-night. Find out where she lives. If I can get her address, we'll have C. J. where we want him. Until we know that, we're nowhere. We haven't any time to waste fooling around. She may see that ad to-morrow and answer it. Take her home, if you like, or follow her home. It's all one to me as long as you find out where she lives. As soon as you know, come around and tell me. I'll do the rest. I'll go now. No,

sit still. I don't want to take a chance on her seeing us together. So long!"

She came around Martin's side of the sofa, and without stirring he watched her all the way to the stairs, with a mind quite blank, however, as far as she was concerned. He had something else to think about.

He had spotted his association with the name Rhoda. For the past week some one had been advertising every day in the personal column of *The News* for the address of Rhoda McFarland. It was part of Martin's daily routine to read the personal column pretty carefully. Every now and then he found the beginning of a story in it. He had especially noted these advertisements for Rhoda McFarland because of a minor oddity about them. Usually the advertisers for the addresses of missing persons were firms of attorneys who offered their own names and addresses in full. But these had all been blind ads. The answerer was invited to communicate his facts to "X-203" or something of the sort, care of *The Daily News.*

To-day the form of the ad had changed. Rhoda McFarland, it had said, would learn something to her advantage by communicating with "X-203": Rhoda McFarland, though; not Rhoda White.

What had made the memory of that series of ad-

vertisements pop into his head so suddenly? He'd been eavesdropping intently on the conversation that was going on behind him. Max was to find out where the girl lived to-night because they hadn't any time for fooling around. She might see that ad in the paper to-morrow and answer it. Martin sat suddenly erect and then slumped back again into the corner of his sofa. Had it been his Rhoda they were talking about?

He hadn't yet seen the man who was still sitting on the sofa behind him, but the woman had called him Max. The obvious thing to do was to walk around the sofa and take a look at him; find out if he was the same Max that Rhoda had wanted to be rescued from. But to do that openly would probably give away to the blighter the fact that his conversation with the woman had been overheard by some one who took an interest in it. Better sit still a minute first and check up.

This pair he'd heard talking, what were they up to? They wanted to find a girl before somebody else did, somebody who was advertising for her. The woman had thought she recognized her but hadn't been sure. Apparently she'd sent for Max to come and scrape an acquaintance with the girl and find out whether she was the one they wanted. "She's the girl, all right," Max had said. She was a "cagey little brat," but he'd found

out her first name. And this, added to the woman's half-recognition, he regarded as conclusive. He wouldn't have said that, wouldn't have gone through the process at all, Martin reflected, had the name under which the girl was introduced to him been that of the girl he was looking for. The first name fitted in, and the second one didn't: Rhoda White, instead of Rhoda McFarland.

He remembered her having said to him up there in the box that Lewis might have changed his name, since people did sometimes. He remembered the rather intent look she'd given him when he asked her to tell him her first name. No wonder, if Max had just been fishing for it! It seemed a bit queer, though, that she should have told Max. Queer, too, that she, a girl with that forthright air of hers, should be going about under an assumed name. Did even Babe, who called her Red so familiarly, know what her real name was? He doubted it, somehow.

His sensitive reporter's nose had detected the trail of a story and mere professional instinct started him off planning how he could run it down. Talk to Babe Jennings to-night and find out how much she knew about the girl. She probably knew where she lived, anyhow. Get at the advertising file to-morrow morning

and find out who X-203 was. For a guess, he'd turn out to be the C. J. whom Max and his lady friend were trying to take advantage of. And then go through all the McFarlands in the morgue to see if he could discover any reason why a Rhoda of that name should have changed it for the colorless name White, and disappeared.

His reporter's mind went as far as that point as easily as a well-lubricated car rolls down-hill. But at that point it stopped with a jolt that both shocked and astonished him. He saw her face smiling at him in friendly confidence as she'd smiled when she'd danced away with Higgins. He didn't want a story about her. He hated the idea that there was a story. If there was one that for any reason she wanted buried, buried it should remain for all of him. The paper could go to hell!

Something had happened to him. He'd never felt like that before. But now wasn't the time to go into that. He must find Rhoda and tell her what he'd overheard. Then if she needed help, he'd help her.

The music stopped sooner than he'd expected it to and he got up precipitately. If he'd seen Babe Jennings coming along he'd have sat still for another three seconds and let her go by.

As it was she saw him and sang out to him as she approached, "Hello, Marty! What have you done with Red White?"

He could think of nothing better to do than stay where he was and answer her. "I had to let her dance away with another man," he said. "But I've got the next one with her and I'm going to find her now."

The thing he feared, but hadn't seen how to avoid, happened. With a mighty upheaval the big man on the other sofa got to his feet and turned around. Babe gave a sort of gasp or squeal of surprise, and then waited to see what was going to happen. For a matter of a second or so it looked as if it might be something of a sort that the management of the Alhambra strongly discountenanced, for the two men were looking at each other rather intently.

"Oh, hello!" Max Lewis said. "I didn't know you were here. Did I hear you say you were going to dance this dance with Miss White?"

"I suppose that's what you heard," Martin replied. "I said it." Then he had what he welcomed as an inspiration. "Oh, I beg your pardon," he went on, as if just awakened to his social obligations. "Miss Jennings, will you let me introduce Mr. Max Lewis?"

Babe said she was delighted, and it seemed to Martin

that her enthusiasm was unfeigned. Apparently Lewis thought so too. Anyhow, neither of them objected when Martin nodded them a cheerful farewell and slipped away into the crowd.

Later, but not until an hour or two later, going over the evening on foot, as it were, he was able to surmise that his complacency over the apparent success of this maneuver, getting rid of both Lewis and Babe with a single well-placed introduction, might have had something to do with his discomfiture in the scene which followed with Rhoda. She, of course, couldn't have known how much deeper he'd plunged into her affairs while she'd been finishing out the dance with the negligible Higgins. She couldn't have dreamed that he'd just sacrificed his professional integrity by deciding that his paper shouldn't have her story. And it wasn't surprising if she'd felt when he came up and took her arm, detaching her from her most recent partner with barely a word, that his manner was assuming a good deal too much, as if their friendship had been a matter of months rather than of minutes. He'd been entirely unconscious of this manner at the time. All he'd been thinking of was the importance of what he had to tell her and of what she in return would have to tell him.

He was aware that she looked at him a little oddly as he started to lead her away, and he explained his action, adequately he felt, by saying, "We've got to find some place where we can talk. Shan't we get out of this? I'll take you home if you like."

At that she got rid of his hand rather bruskly and turned to stare at him, still half perplexed but in rapidly mounting exasperation.

"I don't want to get out of this," she said. "I came here to dance." Before he could speak, she added, more amiably, "We can talk now, though, can't we? And look, there's a place we can sit." The sofa she darted off to take possession of occupied perhaps the most public place in that entirely public dance-hall, opposite the head of one of the flights of the grand staircase. "This is all right, isn't it?" she asked.

"I suppose so," he agreed discontentedly. "At least it's got its back to the wall and no one can hear what we say without standing right in front of us and listening."

"But what have we got to say," she demanded, "that anybody shouldn't hear?"

"Plenty," he told her. "Of course I don't know how serious it is. You'll know better than I. It sounded to me like something you ought to be told about."

"'Sounded?' Do you mean you heard people talking about me?"

"I think they were talking about you. I'm practically sure they were."

He didn't like that lead any too well himself, and she increased his dissatisfaction by asking, with a laugh, "Aren't there any other red-headed girls here to-night?" Something she saw in his face must have checked her, for instantly she added contritely, "I didn't mean to be frivolous. Tell me what you heard. Why did you think they were talking about me, unless they spoke of my hair?"

He couldn't answer that question offhand. His chain of inferences had been straight enough once, but it was tangled now. "I'll start with something else," he said, after a moment's silence. "Do you remember asking me why I looked funny when you told me your name was Rhoda, and my saying I had an association with the name that I couldn't spot? Well, I have spotted it now. For the last week there's been an advertisement in the personal column of *The News* for the address of Rhoda McFarland. The reason I'd noticed it was that it was always a blind ad; the advertiser, I mean, never giving his own name."

He had instinctively avoided looking at her while

he was speaking, but the quality of the silence after he'd finished drew his eyes around to her face. He saw it deeply flushed.

"Well," she asked as she encountered his gaze, a sharpness that sounded like panic audible in her voice, "what has that got to do with me?"

He wanted to say, "You are Rhoda McFarland, aren't you?" but his nerve failed him. He didn't try to answer her question.

"Was it Rhoda McFarland you heard them talking about?" she asked at the end of another silence, her voice now in better control, "and did you think there couldn't be more than one person named Rhoda?"

At last his mind was on the rails again. "I didn't hear any name mentioned at all. I'll tell you what I did hear. The man said, 'She's the girl, all right.' The woman asked him how he knew. He said the girl was a cagey little brat—meaning, I suppose, that she hadn't told him as much about herself as he'd tried to find out—but that he had got her first name. That name, apparently, cinched it, since the woman had already half recognized your face—the girl's face, I mean."

She noted the slip and pounced upon it angrily. "Why do you keep talking about me? What makes you think it has anything to do with me?"

"I heard the woman call him Max," he went on doggedly. "He was Max Lewis, all right. I got a look at him later. I don't know who the woman was. I didn't even see her properly. All I noticed about her was that she looked younger, somehow, than her voice had sounded. It came out in their talk that she'd been going by on the sidewalk just as—just as this girl they were looking for turned in. The woman thought she recognized her, got hold of Lewis somehow, and had him come to the dance just to scrape an acquaintance with you. I can't help it. I *do* think it was you they meant. I knew he told you his first name, but I didn't know until then that you'd told him yours."

"I didn't," she instantly put in, with the emphasis, he thought, of sudden relief. "The only person I told my name to to-night was you." But as she said that she faltered and a look of troubled bewilderment came into her eyes. "He might have heard me tell you, though," she added. "I saw him crossing the floor right near us while we were talking about it."

For a moment he thought she'd given in and admitted she was Rhoda McFarland. He moved his hand to cover hers as he said, "Then it's my fault really that he found out, and that makes me the natural person to help you."

He thought it wasn't his touch she minded, for it wasn't until he spoke of helping her that she snatched her hand away. "But I don't need any help," she told him vehemently. "I haven't anything to do with those people. I don't know who Max Lewis is, but I don't believe that he had any reason in the world for getting introduced to me except that he thought I'd be nice to dance with." Her attitude relaxed a little and she smiled. "And I," she went on, "thought that you'd be nicer to dance with. And you were. There goes the music again. Come on! Let's dance some more."

She reached for his hand this time. He took it but didn't follow her move to rise. "They were trying to find you," he stubbornly persisted, "before somebody else did; somebody they are afraid of or are trying to take advantage of; an old man they spoke of as 'C. J.' Do you know who he is?"

"I haven't the remotest idea in the world." There was no doubt she meant that. Apparently the question was a relief to her, for she added, "Can't you see now it's all nonsense?"

"Sit still another minute anyhow and listen to the rest of it. Then perhaps you won't think it's nonsense.

"It was the woman who seemed most excited about you. She told Max it was his job to find out where

you lived, to-night. She said it didn't matter whether he took you home or followed you home. She said that as soon as they knew that, they'd have C. J.—whoever he is—where they wanted him. She said there wasn't any time to waste because you might see that ad in the paper any day and answer it."

She'd snatched her hand away long before he'd finished speaking. Now, in furious exasperation, she cried, " 'I—I—I!' Why do you keep talking about me? Why should I answer an advertisement for Rhoda McFarland? I won't. I'll tell you that much, anyway. And I won't let Max Lewis take me home, either, if that's any satisfaction to you."

"How will you keep him from following you home?"

He saw she flinched at that, and added, "Let me go with you now. We can give them the slip. Why not? Why won't you?"

"Because it's all nonsense," she said weakly. "Because I want to stay and dance."

He didn't believe she thought it nonsense. He didn't believe she wanted to dance. Her wrong-headed refusal to let him help her when he was sure she needed help exasperated him.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," he said. "If you won't

let me take you home, I'll follow you myself and see that he doesn't."

She was angrier than he now, and apparently colder. "Why are you so anxious to find out where I live?" she asked. "Because you think I'm Rhoda McFarland? And there must be a story about me if I'm advertised for—and you want to get it for the paper? Is that the way reporters do?"

It didn't occur to him until quite a bit later to wonder how she knew he was a reporter. For the moment he just sat and stared at her, stupefied at the gross injustice she had done him. Before he could get himself together to controvert the monstrous charge, he perceived the harmless, unnecessary Higgins standing before them.

Rhoda saw him too and sprang to her feet. "Do you want me to dance this one with you?" she asked him. "I'd love to."

Martin, boiling away inside like a teakettle, followed them as far as the edge of the dance floor and stood there a while making up his mind what he should do next. Not really that, perhaps, he conceded afterward, so much as fanning his perfectly righteous indignation and rather enjoying it.

Presently, though, his reflections ceased to be even

dubiously enjoyable. A chill misgiving blew over him that Rhoda might be right after all. Lewis, he noted, was dancing with Babe Jennings with a contented absorption inexplicable under the hypothesis that his only interest to-night lay in taking or following another girl home. When Martin perceived this, he turned away disgustedly and went home himself.

CHAPTER II

WHY SHE CHANGED HER NAME

RHODA tried to tell herself she was glad she had snubbed Martin Forbes. She'd given him fair warning that she didn't want her affairs pried into and he had deserved exactly the treatment he got. She enjoyed, after a fashion, the consciousness of his glaring at her from the edge of the dance floor, but when she perceived that he was no longer there and came to the conclusion that he'd really abandoned her, she found rather suddenly that she was tired of the Alhambra for to-night and wanted to go home. And although she maintained that Martin's suspicions of Max Lewis were wild nonsense, she was rather glad that Leander Higgins offered to take her home.

Their trip, mostly by trolley car, was entirely without incident. Of course it would be! Martin had made up the whole thing out of his own head. She was as friendly as she knew how to be to Leander all the way to the studio door but at that point she said good night

to him firmly. It had been only by the exercising of a good deal of resolution that she'd kept her mind on him up to that point. And until Babe came home she wanted to be let alone.

She hadn't yet made up her mind what she'd say to Babe; whether she'd tell her anything of what had happened to-night, or even whether she'd ask her any questions. She took Babe absolutely for granted as a loyal friend and conceded her the possession of a fund of shrewd wisdom. But once started, could Babe be stopped? The thing her mechanism conspicuously lacked was brakes. She couldn't thinkably be told the whole story, and it would probably be safer to tell her none of it; be in bed and sound asleep when Babe got home. And yet she would like to know whether Martin had said anything to her about his discoveries.

As she glanced around the studio after shutting the door on Leander Higgins her eye fell on to-night's *News* scattered about the floor, as her roommate had left it. Was that advertisement really in the paper, or had Martin Forbes made that up, too? No, there it was in the personal column, just as he'd said. "Rhoda McFarland will learn something to her advantage . . ." She dropped into Babe's chair and the section of the paper slid from a slack hand back to the floor.

It had given her a surprising shock to see her discarded name in print like that. It brought things back that she'd thought she was done with for ever; some things that she hadn't thought about in years.

Their yard at home, with the venerable live-oak in the middle of it, in whose branches she and her three inseparable friends used to scramble about like young monkeys; the three A's they used to call them because their names all began that way—Ann, and Alice, and Amy. And she had used to wish passionately that her name began with an A too. They were all in the same grade; seventh it was, when her father told her one morning that she wasn't to go to school any more for the present.— For the present! She'd never gone to school again; not since that day. And Amy and Alice and Ann faded out of the picture. They didn't come to play in her yard any more.

And she had understood that it was because of something that was spoken of, when it was mentioned at all, as the trial; her father's trial—Professor Walter Whitehouse McFarland. She'd had a glimpse of his name once in black head-lines in the newspaper. Her father had stopped being a professor at the same time she'd stopped going to school. He was at home all the time, and for a while—though whether it was days or

weeks she couldn't remember—they'd made a sort of pretense of having school at home with him for teacher. Interrupted harassed days those were, with people coming to see him and being sometimes told that he was out, even when she knew he wasn't; reporters and men with battered-looking cameras taking pictures—of the house, when they couldn't get anything else.

There were a few days toward the end, just before they left California for good, when he had been away from home all the time and she had known, somehow, that the trial was going on.

Also she had known before she saw him on his return, though again the source of her knowledge eluded her memory, that the outcome of it had been favorable to him, that he had "got off." She must be right about that since she still so vividly remembered her disappointment and perplexity, when she saw him again, over the fact that there was nothing triumphant about him; that he had been, if possible, whiter and more bitterly silent than ever.

She'd hoped he would tell her what the trial had been about. He had never, even in after years, told her that. Only once, that she knew of, had his spirit flashed up.

This had happened when her Uncle William—he

must have been her dead mother's brother; he couldn't have been her father's—had come to see them, after the trial and before they started east. She couldn't remember ever having seen him before, but she did remember the falsely genial smile with which he had reproached her for having forgotten him.

He'd been an ogre to her ever since, and even now, when she told herself that he probably had not been as tall as the ceiling, even as the living-room ceiling of the bungalow, and that his flashing teeth couldn't have been unnaturally luminous, she still clung with a shudder to her childish recollections of him.

Anyhow, her father had not been afraid of him. He'd sent her from the room on Uncle William's saying that her father could probably guess what he'd come to see him about. She'd obediently gone, but only as far as her bedroom, and the boom of the ogre's voice had come through the thin walls all too clearly. He'd come to try to make her father give her away, for ever, to him. He'd spoken of her, terrifyingly, as "the child"! But her father, though quiet and conciliatory at first, had finally defied her uncle and told him to go straight to hell!

She'd never heard him swear before or since and she had thought that the reason of his asking her, after

her uncle had gone, whether she had heard any of their talk. Anyhow, it had been why she told him she had not.

She hadn't understood much of it at the time, beyond her uncle's assertion that her father had disgraced himself and wasn't a fit person to bring up a child. She must, though, have stored up a good many uncomprehended phrases of that talk, or how could she have been so sure, two or three years later, when she read in the newspaper of a sensational prosecution of another professor under the Mann Act that this was the kind of trial her father had had.

Her father, of course, hadn't been sent to prison. He had "got off." But why, if he hadn't done the horrible thing, hadn't he gone back to the college and she to school and Ann and Alice and Amy come to play with her again? Probably because people had thought he'd done it, anyhow.

Their departure from the little university town out in California had felt like running away to her and, she was sure, to her father, also. She could have got the idea from no one but him, and it must have been pretty strong to have quenched the pleasurable excitement she'd otherwise have felt over her first long ride on the train.

They'd had a compartment and her father, she remembered, had hardly left it. A waiter from the dining car had brought all their meals to them. She'd been allowed to go back to the observation car, but she'd been warned not to talk to people and especially not to answer questions. Her father had tried to entertain her. He'd brought along *The Moonstone* and read it aloud to her.

There was one incident about that which she remembered very clearly. Her father's voice had flagged and she'd looked up to see if he'd fallen asleep. He wasn't asleep, but staring out over the desert with such a look of pain in his face that she'd burst into tears.

He'd comforted her very tenderly and had said to her the only thing, she thought, that he'd ever said in direct reference to the catastrophe: "I've got you," he told her, "and they can't take you away from me. And I'm going to see to it that you shan't be the loser by this thing that's happened to me. In the long run it may be just as well for you that it did happen."

At the time she'd had no idea what he'd meant by that. But the events of the later years of his life made it clear enough. He'd had a scheme of some sort, now that he wasn't a college professor any more, for making her rich. A scheme that he'd never brought off, to

be sure, but one that down to the very night of his death he'd never lost hope about. She couldn't doubt, now, from the adult view-point of her eighteen years, that he had undertaken it for her. Nothing that he'd ever said or done made it seem that he cared anything about wealth except for the broad, secure, happy life that it would bring her.

Yet, as it had worked out, it was that hope of his, always on the point of coming true, that had been the cause of most of her unhappiness during the four long years they had lived in that Chicago hotel. She didn't know that she regretted them now. That made a pretty hard sort of problem to work out. Most people, certainly, would say it was a horrible way for a child to be brought up.

The hotel itself was all right, one of the less pretentious ones of the new residential type. Her first impression of it, especially after the rather dingy boarding-house where they'd lived for the first little while upon their arrival in Chicago, had been one of unbridled and incredible luxury: walls and pillars down-stairs that she assumed to be marble; swift elevators run by boys in maroon livery; a head-waiter in a perpetual dress suit.

Their own two rooms up on the tenth floor,

furnished in imitation black walnut and taupe upholstery, especially perhaps the floor lamp with its heavy silk shade, had carried out the idea that they'd come to live in a palace. The kitchenette, with its electric stove, had seemed a marvelous toy to her; and their white tile bathroom, with its modern plumbing and its never failing abundance of hot water, had been a luxury.

She'd taken it for granted, during those first few days while breathless she explored the wonders of the hotel, that the wealth her father had hinted at was already in his pockets. It wasn't until he expressed concern over her loneliness—it was beginning to strike in a little—that she asked him why, now that he was rich, he had to work so hard and couldn't take a little time off to play with her.

He'd smiled and told her he was not rich yet, not rich at all, but that he thought it wasn't going to be long, not more than a few months at most, before he was. As soon as that happened he'd stop work and they'd go roaming the world together. Meanwhile she was to be patient and get along as best she could.

How many times during the next four years had they had that same talk, without essential variation? Dozens—scores! Toward the end, the note of it had got sharper, more like a cry of desperation, until her

one care, with him, had come to be to avoid everything that could remind him of the life she led during the long days from the time he left her at the breakfast table until he came back sometimes long after dinner at night.

She didn't wonder now, looking back upon it, that as the months stretched into years the thought of the little girl left unoccupied and uncared for should have driven him frantic. And yet, somehow, it hadn't been horrible at all.

She'd missed some things, of course. She'd wanted to go to school. She still felt at times dreadfully uneducated. She'd wanted friends—girls of her own age. At least she'd thought she wanted them. She couldn't be sure, now, that the friends she'd had weren't better.

Perhaps it was because she didn't know what she'd been deprived of that she felt as she did about it. But then, girls who had been conventionally brought up didn't know what they'd missed, either. They didn't know, she suspected, what real independence meant. She'd practically never known anything else.

If she'd been a timid child, of course it would have been dreadful. Or if people hadn't naturally liked her and wanted to be kind to her. Or if her father had been the sort who asked nagging questions and told her

she must never do *that* again. She'd begun doing things from the first day he'd left her there in the hotel that he probably wouldn't have approved if he'd known about. Most of the things she'd done had been sensible enough, she thought—and where she hadn't been sensible she must have been lucky, for she'd never got into any serious trouble.

One thing that went a long way toward making her situation tolerable during those four years was the fact that she'd always had as much money as she needed. From somewhere her father had had a perfectly adequate and regular supply. From her fourteenth birthday on, she'd known exactly how much it was: a hundred dollars a week. At that time he'd begun handing it all over to her except what his small personal wants required, and had given her the job of keeping their accounts and paying their hotel bills. It had always been in cash—five yellow-backed twenties. She supposed that was what he'd got from the beginning; that is, from the time they'd left the dingy boarding-house and come to live in the hotel. There'd never been any sign of a change for better or for worse in their circumstances.

She never knew where the money came from. Once she asked him outright, and he had so pointedly ignored

the question that she never asked it again. She was afraid she'd guessed. But she hadn't even dared pursue the subject so far as to tell him her guess and ask whether it was the right one.

She was afraid it was her Uncle William—the ogre. Her whole capacity for fear was concentrated, focused upon that one point. She believed that it was he from whom she and her father had fled, thereby frustrating his intention to take her away.

She'd never asked her father anything about him; didn't really know whether he was married and had children of his own or not. Her impression, gleaned from the quarrel she'd overheard in the bungalow, had been that he had. Her nightmare was that he would pounce upon her, carry her off to his den where he could order her about, shut her up, decree punishments, gloat over her with those shining teeth of his.

The only qualms of panic she ever felt when going about alone on her small excursions to the shops, the library, a near-by movie theater, took the form of a belief that she had seen him or that he was following her. She supposed he was rich; his self-important air on his visit to the bungalow strongly suggested it. If he was the source of the money they lived on, then it meant that he knew where they lived and that he was,

for some reason she couldn't fathom, biding his time. But she was, as a matter of fact, too healthy and happy, even too well occupied, to think about him much.

Really she'd never lacked friends. At least she'd always felt herself surrounded by friendly people; people who seemed pleased when she smiled and said good morning to them; who showed a disposition to treat her kindly; companionable people. But her father's often repeated instruction not to tell who they were or where they came from, to answer no personal questions at all, brought it about that most of her friendships were with members of the staff of the hotel, rather than with residents. These latter too soon began asking questions. Had she no mother? Why didn't she go to school? What did her father do all day long? Wasn't she lonely? Was there no one whose special duty it was to look after her? She couldn't answer questions like that and had to sheer away from the people who asked them.

There was one exception among the guests: a middle-aged pretty woman who always wore black—a widow, Rhoda supposed. She didn't ask many questions because she was deaf, so deaf that you had to shout to make her hear. She was going to a school where you learned lip-reading so that you could tell

what people said by looking at them without hearing their voices at all. The school was down-town in one of the big buildings of the loop, and Mrs. George, whose deafness had come upon her suddenly, hated to venture down into that confusion alone. Her need was a godsend to Rhoda, who volunteered to go with her every morning.

Sometimes they took rides or went shopping afterward. But the principal attraction of these expeditions for Rhoda was the school itself. She went into the class with Mrs. George, and having nothing else to do, she sat and watched and learned lip-reading herself. They did it by movies—close-ups—and they gave you a typewritten page that showed what the person was saying. It took Mrs. George three months to learn, but in half that time Rhoda was infallible at it.

It made life more amusing. She liked to ride in the elevated and watch people talk down at the end of the car. And when she and her father had dinner in the restaurant, his long preoccupied silences did not leave her restless. She would be sampling conversations from all over the room. It was a real bereavement when Mrs. George left the hotel and went to New York to live.

But the best friendship of those four hotel years

didn't begin until after Mrs. George had gone. It was with Miss Bacon, whose rather incredible first name was Florabel, the public stenographer. Her desk, with a big leather easy chair for the client of the moment, was down toward the end of the lobby, beyond the elevators. Rhoda had been saying good morning to her and sometimes stopping beside her desk for a word or two, for months. But in her loneliness after Mrs. George had gone, she formed the habit of making longer visits when she saw Miss Bacon wasn't busy. She made a point of not sitting in the big leather chair, where her presence might frighten clients away, but in a little chair on the other side of the desk.

Miss Bacon was not, Rhoda perceived, as old as she had thought; her being rather stout and her wearing spectacles made her look so. But she had a jolly young voice and a nice smile. She didn't ask any prying questions, nor did she—a thing Rhoda couldn't bear—show openly that she was sorry for her. She talked quite a good deal in a nice friendly way, about her own affairs. Probably she was rather lonely herself. Not that she hadn't any relations, but that they didn't do her any good. Her father, it seemed, had had several wives who had died, one after another, and the children didn't like one another very well, and quarreled.

Florabel had been the youngest and she'd had a horrible time until she'd managed to learn a trade that made her independent.

Independence was Florabel's sacred word. She might make more money, she told Rhoda, working as somebody's secretary, but this way she was her own boss. Everybody, Florabel said, even a girl who was almost sure to get married, ought to have a trade. Then if anything unexpected happened, she'd got something to tie to. "Of course, not if she's rich," she added.

"I'm not rich," Rhoda said. "At least I don't think we are. Father expects to be pretty soon. I wish I could learn stenography. I suppose it's awfully hard."

"That depends," Florabel said non-committally. "How much regular schooling have you had?"

"Oh, I haven't been to school since I was quite a little girl," Rhoda admitted. "I got through most of the arithmetic—decimals, and compound fractions, and square root. And I was about half through the big geography. . . ."

"It's spelling that is most important," Florabel interrupted. "Can you spell?"

"Oh, I think so," Rhoda said. "Spelling isn't hard, is it?"

"It was for me," Florabel told her.

But Rhoda, as it turned out, was one of those lucky people who simply can't misspell a word that they've ever seen in print.

"I could teach you myself," Florabel volunteered. "I'd like to, first rate. I haven't much to do, hardly ever, in the middle of the morning or in the middle of the afternoon."

"That will be awfully nice," Rhoda said, composedly enough, and then suddenly burst into tears.

She hadn't cried where any one could see her, since coming from California on the train, and the effect of the phenomenon was to make both her and Florabel feel different toward each other. She liked having Florabel put a sturdy arm around her, as she had done when she cried, and it seemed natural to tell her things,—things her father probably wouldn't have wanted her to tell, though not very much, after all. Anyhow, Florabel had said, rather dryly, that she *had* better learn stenography, for a fact.

There never was a more enthusiastic pupil, and Florabel seemed as excited about it as she was herself. She worked over the preliminary exercises until her hand cramped and then until it came uncramped again. She was determined, at every lesson, to surprise Florabel by how much more she knew—and she never failed.

The typewriter was fun. Florabel wouldn't let her look at the keys at all. She brought her a chart to look at till she knew where they were, and she had to hit them all by touch. Of course she made awfully funny mistakes at first.

But by the end of two months she could write a clean page if she didn't try to go too fast, and she was taking slow dictation that Florabel read not from prepared exercises but out of the newspaper or anywhere. "I can take it a lot faster than that," Rhoda used to protest, but Florabel would say, "The more haste the less speed," and plod right along.

Then one day a client appeared at the desk in the middle of the lesson. Rhoda caught up her note-book and fled, but not very far; only to the nearest sofa. When the man had finished dictating his letters and gone away she went back to Florabel. "Let me see if I can't write them from *my* notes," she pleaded. "He talked loud enough for me to hear him, all right, and I *know* I've got everything."

Florabel had been rather shocked and she made Rhoda promise not to do it again, but she did let her transcribe her notes on the typewriter and there were only a few small mistakes. What they did after that, with clients they knew, was to ask permission for

Rhoda to sit beside the desk and take the dictation for practise. They were mostly awfully nice about it. If they found the presence of the apprentice distracting they didn't say so.

People were like that, in the main, according to Rhoda's experience—kindly, glad to help one out of a difficulty if it didn't mean taking much trouble—and sometimes when it did.

For instance, the man who had come to the desk early one morning, before Florabel got there. Rhoda had uncovered the typewriter and he had thought she was the public stenographer. Rhoda, not telling him she wasn't, boldly started out taking his letters. She got on all right at first, but he kept going faster and faster and talking so thickly around his cigar that the first thing she knew she was rattled, not getting a thing.

She floundered along in the morass for a minute or two and then laid down her pencil and confessed. She wasn't the public stenographer at all. Just a girl learning. He looked pretty blank for a minute. It seemed he was in a hurry. Then he smiled at her and told her to go back and see how much she'd got. She hadn't missed much, really, and when he went on again she was all right. And it was lucky she had taken his letter since Florabel happened to be late that morning.

But the point was that even for the minute or two when he thought he'd been tricked into wasting his time he hadn't been mean to her. He'd good-naturedly helped her out. And people *were* like that; most of them.

The thing she couldn't understand was why they had been so cruel to her father. He never could have meant, whatever it was he'd done, to hurt anybody in the world. Yet as she remembered with better understanding some of the things that had happened in the last weeks before they left home to come east, the whole town must have turned upon him as if he'd been a leper. They'd broken him, somehow.

She couldn't believe, any more, that the happy time he'd used to talk about—the long holiday when they'd roam the world doing whatever they pleased—would ever come. But the scheme that was to make it possible obsessed him more and more. He almost never talked to her now; he didn't even want her to read to him. And he couldn't be very well, either. His face had a queer blue color sometimes that frightened her. He insisted it was nothing, and when she found out, accidentally, that he'd been to see the doctor who lived in the hotel he told her it was for a touch of indigestion. Florabel was urging her now to go out and find herself

a regular job. She was better fitted for it than most of the graduates of the schools, and as good as she'd ever get until she'd had some actual business experience. Rhoda wanted to do it, but she felt she couldn't without telling her father about the plan before putting it in execution. And she knew—she could fairly see the harassed frantic look that would come in his eyes when she did. He would beg her once more to be patient with him. It was unpardonable, he'd say, the way he'd neglected her, but the bad times were almost over now. If she'd just give him another month . . . She couldn't do that to him the way he was now.

So she put Florabel off, saying she would go looking for a job some time, but that she didn't see that there was any hurry.

At the end of one of these conversations she saw something in her friend's face that made her ask, with a catch in her breath, "*Is* there any special hurry that you know about?"

Florabel visibly hesitated over her answer. "I sort of hated to tell you," she said. "Why, I'm not going to be here very much longer. You see, I'm going to marry Mr. Gage. You know. And of course that means I'm going to Denver to live. And oh, Lamb, I'd like to see you settled before I go!"

Rhoda hated to remember the little scene that followed. She'd said, in her hurt bewilderment, some pretty mean things, about independence and so on, and she'd made Florabel cry. They'd made it up though within the hour. She helped Florabel shop and she went to the wedding and saw the couple off on the train.

She liked Mr. Gage, herself. He was fat, like Florabel, and jolly. He looked rather solemn, though, when he said good-by to her. He gave her his card with his address on it and told her to keep it carefully. If anything ever happened to her, he said, and she found she wanted any help, she was to write or telegraph.

She refrained from asking him what he thought might happen. Of course she really knew.

When, about a fortnight later, an hour after she and her father had finished their late dinner, the blow fell she hadn't been surprised at all. She had had the doctor there within ten minutes, but she'd known then that it was too late for his remedies to do any real good.

The one thing that it was unendurable to remember and impossible to forget was the way her father had pleaded with the doctor for one more day. He frantically believed that enough of the drug they were putting into his veins would give him the little handful of hours that was all he needed.

They did give him more stuff out of the hypodermic syringe, but this time it was morphine and under it he relaxed, so that for a while he talked to her, comfortably but confusedly. He thought it was just after her mother died, when she was five years old.

But a little later after the nurse had come he roused, as from a sleep, stared at Rhoda in a frightened way and tried to speak to her, waving the nurse away as he did so. The only intelligible words she had been able to hear, when he lapsed into unconsciousness, were "papers" and "your Uncle William."

The doctor had been giving some instructions to the nurse. Rhoda intercepted him on his way to the door. "Will he wake up again?" she asked him.

He looked at her steadily a moment before he answered. "No, my dear child, he won't. This is the end." And then, surprisingly, his eyes filled up with tears. "You're only a little girl!" he said, as if it were a discovery. "Won't you let me get some woman here in the hotel to take you in until your friends can come and get you? And won't you let me telegraph now, for them?"

She told him, afraid her voice was betraying her sudden panic, that she would telegraph and that she'd rather go and lie down by herself in her own room.

The words must have sounded all right, since he assented, though a little dubiously. The nurse looked at her oddly as she said she'd call her "when there was any change."

Even with the door shut she could hear the terrible breathing. She wanted to think but she could not. She could only listen. It lasted a long time. When it stopped the cessation brought her bolt upright in bed, unable to draw her own breath for a matter of seconds. It came at last with a sob of relief.

She cried, rather peacefully until, after a while, she heard the nurse coming to tell her. She buried her face in the crook of her arm and lay perfectly still, and the nurse, believing her asleep, went away again, shutting the door after her.

At that, quite suddenly, her mind went to work. What had her father been trying to tell her, in that last flicker of his consciousness? But thinking about that, she decided at last, wouldn't do any good. The fragmentary words worked out to two opposite meanings.

He might, of course, have been telling her to go to Uncle William and that she'd find his address among his papers. But he might have meant that she was to look out for Uncle William and not let him get posses-

sion of the papers. And since her uncle was almost as much an ogre to her as he had been four years ago, it was the latter interpretation that she adopted.

What the doctor had said was the thing that frightened her worst. "You're only a little girl!"

That, of course, was nonsense. She was sixteen and lots of people thought she was older than that. She could pass for eighteen, well enough. He'd said that only because he was sorry for her. But sixteen was still a child according to law. You weren't of age until you were eighteen—or was it twenty-one? And if Uncle William knew where she was and learned of her father's death, he'd come and get her, and she wouldn't be able to get away from him. Well then, the only safe thing for her to do was to disappear before he had time to find out what had happened.

Looking back now on those days, after the passage of two years so packed with life that they seemed longer than the four that had preceded them, she wondered that she, a mere child of sixteen, had been able to follow out that resolution so steadily that no one had tried to put an obstacle in her path.

Except for a telegram, purporting to come from Florabel in Denver, which she had slipped out early that morning and dispatched to herself, she had nothing

to show any one as an indication that she had a friend in the world—and *it* wasn't much good since if you looked at it closely you saw that it hadn't come from Denver at all.

But it had served its purpose with the manager of the hotel, the doctor, the minister who had read the funeral service in the undertaker's chapel. No one guessed—no they *couldn't* have guessed—that the grave child who was making her decisions and arrangements so quietly and competently was in flight before a terror. They'd probably thought her a cold-blooded little thing, though.

She couldn't have done it, of course, if she had not had plenty of money, and, likely enough, not then if the hotel people hadn't been accustomed to her paying the bills. She paid everybody in cash, that morning, and when this was done she had a little over three hundred dollars left, fifteen twenty-dollar bills and a few small ones. She gave away her father's clothes—he had no great store of them—to a friendly porter whom she thought they would fit.

The papers her father had tried to tell her something about had always been kept in a big leather hat trunk that must have been her mother's. She opened it and looked in with the idea of seeing whether her uncle's

address was there, but as the trunk was nearly full she decided against going through it. She didn't much want to, anyway. She took it, as it was, along with her own small trunk in a taxi to a convenient railway station. It hadn't mattered much which station except that it had to be one that had a train that went to Denver.

The next day she took her suitcase with her to the funeral and went from the cold little chapel straight back to the station. She asked a woman with a Traveler's Aid badge to direct her to a night's lodging. She'd learned about the Traveler's Aid from Florabel who had, during their long talks, furnished her with a pretty good working diagram of the perils and pitfalls that a girl had to be wary of in a big city. Florabel had taught her a whole lot besides typewriting, when you came to think of it.

She had spent that night at the Y. W. C. A. where nothing important happened except that by inadvertence she picked her new name. She'd had one all chosen, but when they gave her the register card to sign she'd begun writing her old one, Rhoda Whitehouse McFarland. Half-way through she'd seen what she was doing and stopped. Well, Rhoda White made a good enough name, and she was glad that she hadn't discarded Rhoda. She'd have felt lonely, deprived of that.

The very next day she found a job and met Babe Jennings. The job was at *The News*, where Florabel had told her they took girls without experience in the stenographic department and trained them, themselves. If you were good you had a chance to be promoted to be private stenographer or even secretary to one of the executives.

The funny old rabbit warren of a building daunted Rhoda a little, and it was Babe, sailing out to a late lunch, whom she stopped to ask where she should go. Babe had taken a cool non-committal look at her before she said, with a nod, "Come along, but make it snappy," and conducted her through a labyrinth to within sight of her destined door.

The only technical untruth Rhoda told the employment manager was that her name was Rhoda White. The impression in the manager's mind that the girl had been living in Denver sprang solely from the fact that she said her teacher, Mrs. Walter Gage, lived there.

Her acquaintance with Babe had progressed slowly at first, and it wasn't until she'd been working for the paper six months that the older girl approached her with a proposal that they live together. Babe was excited about an ad she'd taken, of a studio for rent cheap; unbelievably cheap, seventy-five dollars a month. It was

really a whole apartment; two bedrooms and a kitchenette, beside the studio itself. Her scheme was that they get two other girls and that the four of them should keep house in it, getting, that is, their own breakfasts and suppers.

The reason for its cheapness was apparent when they inspected the premises. It was a good studio, all right, the remodeled top floor of an old three-story building on one of the cross-streets of the near north side. But a sky-scraper had been run up right behind it, completely cutting off the north light. They decided, though, that this wouldn't matter to them since they were only going to be in it at night anyway, and they took it. The other two girls they got were dancers, members of the *corps du ballet* of the opera.

To Rhoda the thing had been like the happy ending of a story. The companionship of likable people of her own age went to her head. She would sit and beam sometimes in sheer enjoyment of it, unable to tell the others what she was grinning at, until the thing itself became a joke among them.

They taught her to dance—the other girls had a phonograph—and it became a passion with her. She'd dance with anybody, who could dance well, in a perfect oblivion of delight.

She liked her job and wasn't long getting promoted to be special stenographer to one of the younger men on the executive staff. He had curly hair and the blandness of the youngest of the seraphim, along with an unexpected biting wit that sometimes made you sit up and doubt your ears. He *couldn't* have said that, could he? There was never any malice in it though, and she liked him a lot.

The only imperfection in her whole scheme of life was the little tremor of fear she felt, every now and then, that it was too good to last.

There was no real threat, was there, in Martin Forbes's imaginary discoveries? She didn't know any one named Lewis nor any one who could be spoken of as "C. J." The only person who could be advertising for her was her uncle. For all she knew he might have been doing it for years; off and on ever since she'd disappeared. None of the girls knew her story, and they wouldn't give her away if they did. (The two dancers were away just now on tour with the opera, so she and Babe had the whole studio to themselves.) She wouldn't risk asking Babe any questions, though, about Martin. How well, she wondered, did Babe know him? The thing to do now was to go to bed, and to be sound asleep before she came home.

But she was only half undressed up in one of the little bedrooms that had been partitioned off the loft when she heard the click of Babe's key in the studio door. She listened and felt her skin pringle as she thought she recognized the voice of the man who was urging Babe to let him come in for a smoke. Babe was firm about it and sent him away.

Rhoda put on her bathrobe and slippers and came slithering down into the studio.

"Who was that who brought you home?" she asked.

"You ought to know, dearie," Babe told her. "He's your friend, not mine. You had him all boiled down and put away before I ever got hold of him. When he found out I lived with you I couldn't push him off. He brought me home in his Rolls-Royce runabout, but it was John Alden stuff I was doing all the time, and I knew it."

"Was it Max Lewis?" Rhoda asked.

"None other, darling," said Babe. "I had forgotten you had two of them on, to-night."

There was a silence for a moment after that. When Babe spoke again it was in a different manner.

"He asked me one queer thing about you, Red. He asked if your real name wasn't Rhoda McFarland."

CHAPTER III

FLAT BURGLARY

MARTIN FORBES told himself firmly as he went to bed that night that he'd had his lesson. That was what he got for trying to interfere altruistically in somebody else's affairs. Rhoda had treated him not as a friend but as a reporter trying to run down a story. It must be a pretty good story if she was so afraid he'd get it. All right, by golly, he'd *be* a reporter, and the first thing to-morrow morning he'd go after that story and nail it down. And in the meantime he'd stop thinking about her and go to sleep.

He counted four hundred and ninety-seven sheep jumping over a fence and then, in disgust, lighted his night light, reached out for a volume of Jane Austen and opened it in the middle. A couple of chapters of this ought to send him off. Elizabeth Bennett at the Netherfield ball. People must have gone to sleep on their feet dancing the way they did in those days. What would Elizabeth have thought of the Alhambra? And

what would have been her opinion of a red-headed girl who would let herself be picked up by a total stranger right in the middle of a dance? Had he been a total stranger, though? Or had Rhoda known who he was all along? She'd known he was a reporter, all right, when the time came.

No, it was no good trying to read. He shut the book with a sigh, turned off the light, and started over the evening again from the beginning, as minutely as he could, trying to remember every detail and not skipping any of the hard parts. He did drift off to sleep at last, but he must have gone right on thinking in his sleep for he sprang out of bed at six o'clock—a ghastly hour at which, he reflected, it was improbable that any other newspaper reporter had ever got up voluntarily—under the obsession of a horribly disquieting idea.

That maneuver he'd been so proud of at the time—getting rid of Babe Jennings and Max Lewis by introducing them to each other—appeared now as likely to have been a downright idiotic blunder. Babe and Rhoda might inhabit very different spiritual worlds, but wasn't it likely that if Babe knew her well enough to call her Red and get away with it, she'd also know the crude material facts about her—where she lived, where she worked, and so on—which were all that Max Lewis was

interested in? And wouldn't Babe spill anything she knew to anybody who was interested in finding it out? Why the devil hadn't he thought of that last night?

Well, it was probably too late to repair the error now. He'd got to get hold of Babe, though, at the earliest possible moment. He'd better waylay her on the sidewalk this morning as she was coming to work and warn her not to tell Lewis anything that she hadn't told him already. The more he thought about the possibilities of his blunder the worse they seemed.

He dressed, bolted his breakfast and was waiting at the foot of the elevated stairs on Wells Street a good quarter of an hour before Babe could be expected to appear. He watched the crowds, though, that poured down from each arriving train just as intently as though she might have been found among them.

By the time he'd finished his second cigarette he felt as if he'd been standing there for hours, as if everybody that came along wondered what he was doing there. And then, so surprisingly that he had to blink and shake his head to make sure that his imagination wasn't deceiving him, he saw not Babe, but Rhoda herself coming down the stairs, Rhoda with her red hair all covered up by the little blue béret his memory had tried to tell him about last night. What would she do

when she saw him? Toss her head and walk scornfully by without speaking at all? Or pause to make some other blighting aspersion on his good faith in having tried to help her.

She didn't do either of those things. Her face lighted up at the sight of him, and when she came within reach she held out her hand.

"This is an awfully nice way for the day to begin," she said. "I'm sorry I called you a reporter last night."

"I am one," he told her.

"Oh, I know you are, but you weren't *being* one last night. I don't know why I said that. I suppose because I have red hair."

"This is turning out a much better day than I thought it could," he observed. "I wish I'd known last night that this was going to happen. How *did* it happen? Do you often come down these stairs about this time?"

He perceived she was laughing at him as she asked, "You weren't waiting for me, then?"

"I would have been, all right, if I'd known," he said. "Have you got a job near here?"

"The door's about fifty feet away," she told him. "I've worked for *The News* for two years."

"Look here," he demanded, when he'd digested this

fact, "did you know who I was all along—last night, I mean?"

"I thought it might be you. I wasn't sure, though, till Babe called you Marty."

"Honest?"

"Honest."

She answered him quite simply, not seeming surprised at his pressing so minute a point. He didn't quite know himself why it was so important, but it was.

"Well," he said, "we've got a lot of lost time to make up for. If I'll agree not to talk about anything you don't want to talk about, will you have dinner with me to-night?"

"Yes," she said, "but I'll tell you what I'd rather do if you'd just as leave. I'd rather you came to supper at the studio. We'll cook something good to eat, and if we want to dance we'll turn on the Victrola. Would you like that, really? Then give me a pencil and a piece of your newspaper, and I'll write down the address."

He'd have asked her what sort of studio it was if she hadn't glanced up as she handed back his paper and pencil and exclaimed, "There comes Babe! It must be getting late."

Babe sang out a rather knowing hello to the two of them, but, even if it was late, came on unhurriedly.

Rhoda called back over the intervening heads, "Martin's coming to supper with us to-night," and then with a nod vanished into the entrance to the building.

The implication he'd perceived in that last remark of Rhoda's disturbed Martin so much that he forgot to be polite.

"Look here," he said to Babe as she came up, "did that bird Lewis that I introduced to you last night find out where Rhoda lived from you?"

He hadn't meant it to sound quite as brusk as that, and seeing that he'd annoyed her he added, "Don't mind me. I mean well, but that's something I want to know."

"You two make a pair, all right, you and Max. It seems you both went ga-ga about Red last night. Why, Max took me home, and since I told him she and I lived together, I suppose he knows. Why shouldn't he?"

"He was too damned anxious to find out, that's all. He's a bad boy if I know one when I see him. How much more did you tell him about her?"

"Why, we talked of little else, dearest," said Babe. "He wanted to know *all* about her, and I tried to be accommodating—like I am now."

There was no sense, of course, in letting her get his goat, as she was playfully trying to do. He didn't doubt that her heart was in the right place as far as Rhoda was concerned, and so, trying to make his voice sound good-humored, he said, "All right, be just as accommodating and tell me what you told him."

"I told him that we were childhood friends, just like ham and eggs, and that we were both honest working girls down here at *The News* all day, and only butterflies at night. And I told him we lived in a studio with two other girls, who danced for a living instead of for fun, but that they were on tour now with the ballet so that we were all alone. And that we cooked our own meals, except when friends asked us out to dinner. I thought he'd come across at that but he didn't. I thought he was something of a piker, if you want the low-down on it, even if he did drive me home in a Rolls-Royce."

"Was there anything else he wanted to know about Rhoda?" Martin asked.

He didn't know why she should have flared up at that, but she did. "Look here, who elected you Red's guardian?" she demanded hotly. "I've known her about seven hundred times as long as you have and I'm not trying to get her in dutch with anybody."

He didn't know what to say to that, but the look in his face must have answered for him, for with a complete change of manner, she went on. "What is it, Marty? Is there anything wrong with him? Do you know anything about him?"

"No," he told her, as they entered the building together. "But I think he's up to something queer and I'm going to try to find out what it is. And if you happen on anything that gives you a line on it let me know."

He thought she hesitated as though she had something on her mind, but all she did was to nod assent and say as she walked off that they'd see him for supper to-night about seven.

Martin's own day's work was yawning for him in the local room, but he didn't go there. He went into the morgue instead, on the chance that he'd find there some scrap of information about Max Lewis. The search was much better rewarded than he'd expected it to be, though there was nothing fresher than four years old and it naturally threw no direct light on the man's present activities.

Max had had his promenade in the public eye by virtue of a breach of promise suit for one hundred thousand dollars that had been brought against him by

a chorus girl. He'd been intimate with her, it seemed, and had written her the usual half-dozen imbecile love-letters. All that gave them interest, either to the public or to the chorus girl herself, had been the fact that Max, though it wasn't clear that he had any property of his own, had a vested right, so to speak, in an authentically rich bachelor uncle who might be expected to come down and settle the girl's claim. It didn't appear from anything in the file that he had, though he gave the reporters a rather picturesque interview on his nephew's behalf.

The only direct find for Martin in the mess was the uncle's name and address. It was "Charles J. Forster," and he was spoken of as a capitalist with large oil interests in various parts of the country—Charles J. Forster, "C. J."! That practically tied it up, but not quite. Not well enough for Martin, who was a good reporter.

He went down-stairs, stopping on the way to copy the want ad in the personal column for the address of Rhoda McFarland.

"I think I'm on a story," he told Snow, in charge of the advertising file. "If I'll promise to be discreet about it, will you find out for me who the X-203 is who's been running this ad?"

Snow thought he might do that and went off to look it up, coming back within five minutes with the name written on a slip of paper. X-203 was C. J. Forster, just as Martin had thought he would be. His address was the Worcester Hotel.

The next step would be to interview Mr. Forster and try to persuade him to tell why he was advertising for Rhoda McFarland. This was a step he didn't want to take without Rhoda's permission. So he made his way to the local room and went to work for the newspaper.

At half past five that night, with the pious hope that the city editor would like the story he'd turned in for the next day's issue better, and think it funnier, than he did himself, he left the now deserted local room, stopped at a fancy grocery in the loop to buy a pot of guava marmalade, hoping this time that the girls would like it as well as he did, and went home to shave and put on a clean shirt.

Though he had conscientiously killed time he arrived at the address Rhoda had given him a few minutes ahead of his hour and he paused for a survey of the premises from the outside. It was a remodeled dwelling with a converted basement which was now an antique shop, and a first floor, guessing from the sign

painted on the glass, that housed a dressmaking establishment. It served some commercial purpose during the day, anyhow, but it was now dark. It must be a rather lonely place at night, he thought, and he didn't very much like the idea of Rhoda's living in it, though he noted, with a grin at his own expense, its not occurring to him that anything might happen to Babe.

Something *had* happened in the studio, though; at least something had happened to one of its tenants since he'd seen them that morning. He sensed it the moment they let him in, and he grew surer he was right as time went on. There was no lack of cordiality about their welcome, and they greeted his pot of marmalade with enthusiasm. They were trying hard, he saw, to keep up the festive spirit of a party. They'd got up a really good supper—creamed sweetbreads with fried bacon was the foundation of it. The studio was an attractive place to live in, once you'd got inside the door, and it was plain the girls were proud of it. But to-night something had gone wrong. It might, of course, be nothing more than some small domestic quarrel that had flared up between them, but it didn't seem like that.

All that Rhoda betrayed was a lack of the buoyancy he'd felt in her last night and again during their brief encounter this morning. He noted that when he and

Babe were keeping things up between them and she went, so to speak, off duty, she looked listless and depressed. As for Babe, she seemed to be bursting with something. She was excited and she was trying to be mysterious. She was concerned about Rhoda too, judging from the way her gaze followed the other girl whenever she moved about the room.

Martin found himself getting rather imaginative. One minor episode while they were at supper made him wonder whether he was imagining the whole thing:

The bell rang from down-stairs and the rather nondescript visitor whom Babe admitted announced himself as a name-taker for the new city directory. He wanted to get the names and occupations of everybody who lived in the apartment. Rhoda, Martin thought, didn't much like the idea of giving them to him but she made no open objection, and Babe recited them while he wrote them down in a little leather bound note-book. He had to have Rhoda's name spelled for him.

There was no real reason for doubting that he was what he pretended to be, yet Martin did doubt the man almost to the point of asking him to show his credentials. He had an idea that name-takers wrote the names they got on printed slips rather than in the pages of a pocket note-book. Also he thought the man turned

a rather penetrating look on him. But he didn't want to do something officious every time he was with Rhoda, nor to do anything to-night that would add to her disquiet. It was probably nothing but imagination.

It wasn't, though, imagination that something had happened to upset the girls. Babe eventually gave that away completely. It transpired that she had a fairly heavy date at nine o'clock and she seemed worried over the idea of leaving Rhoda in order to keep it. She even offered, in what she meant for a confidential aside, to break this date so that Rhoda, if Martin went home early, should not be alone in the studio.

Rhoda vetoed the proposal with a vigorous shake of her red head and the cloud over Martin's spirits lifted as he realized that she meant to let him stay on and have a visit alone with her after Babe had gone.

The last thing Babe did before, in full panoply, she left the studio was to go over to Rhoda and hug her. "Don't you worry any more about it, precious," she said. "Something nice is going to happen soon that'll make you forget all about it. I've got a hunch about that that's strong enough to bet money on."

Martin bit down the question he wanted to ask the moment Babe had really gone and said something nice about her instead: what a good loyal sort she was.

"Oh, she *is!*" Rhoda assented with a shaky laugh. "But she's about as easy to see into as a goldfish bowl. She promised she wouldn't let you suspect that anything had happened here, and she's gone off now without the faintest idea that she's given anything away." Before Martin could think of anything appropriate to say to that, she went on, "I'll tell you what it was: there was a burglar here this afternoon."

"Did he get away with anything—important?"

His choice of that word seemed to strike her but she didn't comment upon it then. "He got three hundred dollars of mine," she said. She went on in response to Martin's stare of astonishment, "I'm ashamed to admit I was so silly as to keep a lot of money like that in cash in my room. I'd had it a long time and I thought it was safely hidden—under the paper lining of one of my bureau drawers. Probably that was one of the first places he looked."

Martin thought most likely it was, but instead of saying so he asked if they had any idea when it had happened or how the man had got in.

"It would be an awfully easy place to get into any time during the day," she admitted ruefully. "The dressmaking people like to leave the outer door unlocked so that their customers can come right up. Our door

wasn't broken, but I suppose a burglar could have picked the lock easily enough."

He went and took a look at it. "The way this lock's put on," he told her, "any one could open it with a kitchen knife." She didn't say anything to that and he went back to his chair, where he sat thinking for a while in silence. She was an awfully unusual girl, that way. She'd *let* you sit and think.

"Was the three hundred dollars all he took?" he asked at last.

"Wasn't it enough?" she countered with a sober smile.

He was afraid it was thin ice, and he didn't want to get her angry with him again, but he ventured to answer, "No. That is, I wasn't surprised at the burglary but I was surprised that he took money. Haven't you missed anything else? A document of some sort, or a letter—or perhaps a photograph? I'm just guessing, you see."

She remarked, "I don't think you're exactly guessing. You're thinking about Mr. Lewis and the things you heard that woman telling him, last night. But I haven't any document or any letter—I mean I haven't lost any—and I don't own any photographs, except of Babe and Doris and Isabel."

"I *was* thinking about Lewis," he confessed. "I know a little more about him than I did last night. I wanted to find out what he was up to, especially after Babe told me he'd taken her home last night in his Rolls-Royce and asked her a lot of questions about you."

He saw her face flame at that and he thought she held her breath while she waited for him to go on. "He isn't what anybody would call a valuable citizen but, at that, he doesn't seem like the man to break in here and steal your three hundred dollars. He wrote some indiscreet letters to a chorus girl once, and she sued him for a hundred thousand. Probably she wouldn't have done it if he hadn't had a rich respectable uncle she hoped would buy her off. His name's Charles J. Forster. He lives at the Worcester Hotel. Did you ever hear of him?"

Apparently she attached no importance to the question for she answered it with a mere absent shake of the head. Her thoughts were somewhere else.

"I want to tell you one other thing I did this morning, Rhoda," he went on, and this brought her focused inquiring look back to his face. "I got them to look up, in the want-ad file, the real name of the man who's been advertising for the address of Rhoda McFarland.

It's the same man. Charles J. Forster.—'C. J.' do you see? The man they were talking about last night."

The flash of incipient panic he'd seen in her face, changed to a look of mere perplexity before he finished speaking. "But I don't know who he is!" she told him vehemently. Then, suddenly intent, she asked, "Did you do anything else?"

"There was only one thing left to do, and that was to look him up and ask him why he was advertising—for her. And—and I didn't want to do that unless you said you wanted me to."

She thought that over for a moment before she spoke. She wasn't angry with him, though, as he'd feared she would be.

"You might have asked him," she said at last. "After what I told you last night you might have argued that it was no affair of mine what you found out about—her. But I'm glad you didn't. Please don't do it, Martin. Let me tell you a little, and then don't try to find out anything more.

"I'm Rhoda White now but I used to be Rhoda McFarland. The only person who'd try to find me would be my uncle, William Royce. Mr. Forster must be working for him. He frightened me so when I was a little girl that I've never got over being afraid of him.

He was cruel to my father and wanted to take me away from him, then. We ran away so that he couldn't.

"I was only sixteen when my father died and I was afraid that if Uncle William heard about it and knew where I was, he'd get me, then. There wasn't any one else, you see. So I changed my name and pretended I came from Denver, and got a job on *The News*.

"And, Martin, I've *loved* it. I've loved it all. The whole two years. I've been happy. I didn't know any one could be happy like that. I like this place and I like the girls, and—and now I like you. And I don't want anything changed. You won't do anything to change things, will you?"

She was looking rather blurred and he blinked in order to see her better. "No, I won't do anything you don't want me to," he said. Then he did a little rudimentary arithmetic. "If that was two years ago you're only eighteen now."

"Do you mind?" she asked him seriously.

"No," he said, "I don't mind at all."

After a while she said, "You must have worked awfully hard to-day, to have found out all that about Max Lewis and the chorus girl. How did you do it?"

"It was all in the morgue," he told her. "It took about ten minutes."

She'd been working for the paper two years and she didn't know what the morgue was. Martin, with a true reporter's pride in the whole news-gathering side of the organization, told her all about it. In fact, as sometimes happened to him when launched on one of his enthusiasms, he rather let the theme run away with him. He was startled, therefore, when a sudden movement of hers, a sort of shudder, roused him to look around into her face. "What's the matter?" he gasped.

"I think it's horrible," she said shakily. "It means that there's no—forgiveness at all. Ever. Anything that any one has ever done—or that people think he has done—is kept there, waiting to be got out and told all over again. Any one who wants to go and open a drawer can find it. And they call it the morgue. Martin, I didn't know anything could be as cruel as that!"

"But you've got it all wrong," he protested. "A newspaper doesn't keep a morgue for the purpose of intimidating people with their pasts. Nine times in ten the file's used for writing handsome obituary articles. When a man dies they want to be able to tell how important he's been. And they never go to those files except when some current news story calls for it. If that chorus girl, for instance, sued somebody else for

breach of promise to-morrow, the reporter assigned to the story would look her up in the morgue and would probably mention that she'd pulled the same stunt on Max Lewis back in 1923, or whenever it was. Or if Max himself were to be indicted for running a confidence game, or passing a bad check, it's possible that his file in the morgue would be useful in writing a story about him. But in the main the papers don't print near as much as they might. If people knew how much they might print that they don't, they'd feel more kindly toward reporters."

But nothing he could say on the subject seemed to change her feeling about it. "Let's try to forget about it," she said at last.

On his agreeing to that—and he'd have agreed to almost anything just then—she pushed her advantage a little further. "Let's forget about everything that's mysterious and depressing, will you? Will you agree that the burglar was just a plain burglar who was perfectly satisfied with my three hundred dollars, and that Mr. Forster and Mr. Lewis were only trying to find me—to settle a bet, or for some silly reason like that? And then, Martin, will you take me somewhere for the rest of this evening where we can dance?"

"You bet I will," he said. "I'll agree to the whole

program—for the rest of the evening—if you'll let me say just one thing first."

She considered this request a little dubiously, but finally said, "All right; just one, though."

"If you're really eighteen years old . . ."

"I really am," she interrupted, "—almost. My birthday's in two weeks—October thirty-first; Hallowe'en, it is."

"Hurrah!" he said. "We'll have a party! Well then, on Hallowe'en you'll come of age and you'll have no more reason to be afraid of your uncle than I have. He'll have no more authority over you than he'll have over the King of England. And even in the meantime I don't see that he could do very much. That's all. Now let's go to the Alhambra. And heaven help Leander Higgins, or any one else who tries to cut in on us to-night!"

Down-stairs in the tiny vestibule she noticed that there were some letters in their mail-box. The postman had come, she remembered, while they were so excited about the burglar that they both forgot to go down and get the mail. She didn't want to be bothered with it now, though. All she wanted to do was dance.

CHAPTER IV

THE LETTER

SHE forgot the letters again when she came home from the Alhambra, but Martin remembered them and went down-stairs with the key to bring them up. This was after she'd overruled his suggestion that he be allowed to stay until Babe came, but had accompanied him instead on a half playful search, hand in hand, of the whole apartment, including under the beds, for any chance burglar who might have got left over.

When he came back with the letters he'd merely said, after looking at her a minute, "Good night, Rhoda," and gone away, although the idea of a kiss had hung palpably between them for an instant. She wouldn't have minded his kissing her good night, but she got a real thrill out of the fact that he didn't, although he evidently wanted to. She realized that when he did kiss her he'd mean more by it, and there was a touch of real Scotch thrift about Rhoda that appreciated the economy.

It was the same quality in her that made her put off letting herself drift away into a pleasant day-dream over the hours just passed until she should have finished her evening tasks and got into bed. Otherwise she wouldn't have looked at the letters at all.

One of them was addressed, in an angular feminine hand she didn't know, to her, "Miss Rhoda White." It was with a rather indifferent feeling of perplexity that she sliced open the envelope. But with her first incredulous stare at what was written on the stiff folded sheets of note-paper it contained, she felt a frightened wish that Martin hadn't gone home, for the thing began: "Dear Miss McFarland."

She was trembling so that she went over and sat down on the couch before she read any further. She felt as if things were closing in on her somehow; the way a bird feels, perhaps, when the beaters are driving it toward the wall behind which a man is waiting with a gun.

"I hope I haven't frightened you, beginning like that," she read, "but you do not know me—you *may* never have even heard of me—and I wanted to make sure that you would read this letter, because it is important to me whether it is to you or not.

"I am going to ask you a great favor. It has got nothing to do with money. I have got money enough,

thank heavens! to put this through even if it costs a whole lot. But I am simply desperate for something I am sure you can help me find. It was a paper that I asked your father to take care of for me when I was working for him in his laboratory over on Erie Street. I was no longer with him at the time of his passing away and when I went to the hotel to see you after I heard of it you were gone. I saw you there once when you were just a 'kiddie,' but I am sure you would not remember me. I think I would know you, though, even though you must have grown up by this time. You were like your father then and if you are kind, like he invariably was, you will do anything in your power to help me to the thing it is necessary for me to have.

"It makes too long a story to tell this way and I want you should have my whole confidence in this matter. Will you come to lunch with me to-morrow in the Tip-Top Inn? I will be there from twelve o'clock on, at the table to the right of the door in the Dutch Room. I will be wearing a black hat and a dark blue dress.

"Yours most sincerely,

"CLAIRE CLEVELAND.

"P. S. I want to say this in addition. I think it will be as much for your advantage as mine if you come. The man who treated me so shamefully is the same man who played a mean and treacherous trick on your father and practically ruined his life in order to make himself rich; and I think if you and I work together we can force him to make things right for you as well as for me—at least as far as money can make anything right. Let me warn you of one more thing, and I hope it is not too late. Do not answer any communication *of any sort* from any stranger until you and I have had our talk. I

have reason to believe he now has designs on you, too. You may not have found out yet what some men can be like, but *believe me* (not slang) I know!

"Yours, CLAIRE."

Rhoda read the thing straight through without making any pauses for reflection and analysis, and it wasn't until she got to the post-script that the false note began to sound loud enough to arouse her suspicion. It annoyed her to be spoken of as a "kiddie," and the phrases "kind, like he invariably was" and "I want you should have my whole confidence in this matter" grated on her. But down to the first signature she never thought of doubting that the woman had worked for her father and had given him a paper to take care of for her. She knew that the place he went to work every day had been somewhere on Erie Street, and it was natural that it should have been a laboratory since it was chemistry he'd been a professor of before the crash came. She wondered how the woman had found her and noted the fact that this wasn't explained, but she put it among the details that had been too numerous and complicated to write in a letter and assumed that it would be explained as soon as they met at lunch.

But with the beginning of the post-script she began to feel herself bristling with suspicion. Nevertheless

she went on and read it through to the suddenly affectionate "Yours, Claire" before she let herself begin picking it to pieces.

This treacherous trick that some man had played upon her father, in order to make himself rich—had such a thing ever happened? In itself, it sounded fishy. Her father had never told her anything specific about his affairs, but she knew he must have been trying to discover or to invent something. The man might have stolen her father's discovery—if her father had ever succeeded in making it. But he hadn't succeeded. He'd gone on hoping to make it right up to the day he died.

Could he have been tricked without ever knowing it? That was possible, but the implication in this letter was that he had told "Claire" all about it. If that was what she meant to imply, she was lying. Rhoda felt an indestructible certainty that her father would never have told any girl who happened to be working for him in his laboratory that his life had been "practically ruined" by a treacherous friend. Claire Cleveland had, most likely, made up the story out of whole cloth. But why?

When she reread the injunction not to answer any communication *of any sort,* the heavily underscored words flashed like a red danger signal. The "com-

munication of any sort" was the advertisement for Rhoda McFarland. She knew who the woman was now; the woman Martin had tried to tell her about last night who'd been afraid she would answer the advertisement in the paper before they had time to take whatever steps they meant to take. She wished she remembered better what Martin had told her.

Who was the man Claire wanted to force to make things right—"as far as money could make anything right"? (The slimy hypocrisy of that afterthought turned Rhoda a bit sick.) Wasn't he most likely the Mr. Forster whose advertisement she was not on any account to answer? Wasn't he the "C. J." whom Martin had heard them talking about?

Well, one thing was settled, anyhow. She'd see Martin and get the details all straight before she went to that lunch at the Tip-Top Inn. If he happened to be waiting again at the foot of the elevated stairs that would make everything easy.

It may be noted that it didn't occur to Rhoda not to keep the appointment the woman had made. Neither, though she could feel her cheeks burning as she got up to put the letter away, did it occur to her that she was angry.

Martin was waiting at the foot of the elevated stairs,

but beyond that point, everything in Rhoda's program went as badly as possible. To begin with, she and Babe didn't come down the stairs but descended at the curb from a lordly limousine, instead. It was Babe who'd accepted the offered lift, but Rhoda had on this occasion followed her companion gladly enough, since they'd been hurrying and had seen their elevated train pull out of the station just about a minute before they got within running distance.

Stopping his car for them must have been an act of pure benevolence on the part of the owner, a respectable old gentleman with a beard. As he sat, he took up most of the back seat, and instead of moving over he had had them turn down the two folding chairs to ride in. A pair of rubber shod canes in the corner gave Rhoda the idea he couldn't move about very easily. He asked them where they wanted to go, instructed his chauffeur to drive them there, and then apparently forgot all about them, submerging himself in his morning paper. He acknowledged their thanks at the end of the ride with a gruff, half-embarrassed nod, and that was all there was to it.

But when Rhoda turned from smiling good-by after him to find herself standing face to face with Martin, she perceived at once from his flush and his frown of

annoyance that he hadn't liked it. He had even the air, she thought, of waiting for a justly to be demanded explanation. There was one ready to hand as far as that went. She'd never have got into that car if Babe hadn't already committed her to it. But she wouldn't have told Martin that for anything.

Babe's contribution didn't help matters either. She said to Rhoda, after tossing a negligent hello to Martin, "What do you suppose the old billy-goat picked us up for, anyway, making us sit on those folding seats all the way? Mostly they want you to cuddle up a *little,* no matter how old they are."

She didn't wait for any answer from Rhoda, and probably perceived why she wasn't going to get any, for she quoted dramatically from a current popular song, " 'For the boy was you and the girl was me!' " and left them.

"I'm glad you happened to be here," Rhoda said to him in the coldest tone she could produce. "I wanted to ask you about the woman you heard talking night before last at the Alhambra. What she looked like and just what she said to Mr. Lewis."

If he'd answered her properly she'd have forgiven him for looking annoyed over the limousine. She would have told him, when she got around to it, how it

had happened. But he didn't answer her at all—flashed back at her, instead, with two questions of his own.

"What's she been doing since last night? Was there a letter from her in that bunch I brought up-stairs?"

It was annoying to have her thunder stolen like that.

"I don't know," she said. "That's what I'm trying to find out. There was a letter for me from some one who signed herself Claire Cleveland, and I thought she might be the person you told me about."

If she hadn't still been cross with him she'd have liked the keenness of his interest and the swiftness with which his mind worked. He asked three more questions now, all in a breath.

"Why did you think she was? What did she say she wanted? Have you got her letter here with you?"

She answered them, still trying to be cool about it, in reverse order.

"No, naturally not. I put it away. Why, she said that a couple of years before my father died she'd given him a paper to take care of for her, and that now she needed it terribly, and she thought I might be able to help her find it. I don't know exactly why I thought she might be the woman you told me about."

"Well, she is, all right. Anybody could see that."

This, she reflected, was as much as to say that she was a fool not to have seen it for herself at the first glance. Was he really like this, she wondered, and was she seeing him now in his true colors for the first time, or was something the matter with her this morning? No, he really was infuriating. He was staring at her now in a blank abstraction, as if he didn't know she was there. When he waked up it was to ask further questions.

"What does she ask you to do? Let her come and see you and go over your father's papers and pick out what she likes?"

"All she asked me to do," Rhoda told him, resolved to stifle her wrath until she burst, "was to come and lunch with her at the Tip-Top Inn to-day as soon after twelve as I could, so that she could tell me all about it. And before I went I thought I'd ask you to tell me . . ."

"Rhoda, you're not going?"

He had had the grace to put an upward quirk on that last word to make it sound like a question, but he'd started, she thought, to tell her she shouldn't.

"Of course I'm going," she said. "She may be all right even if she is the woman you heard talking to Mr. Lewis. Anyhow, I'm going to find out."

"You won't find out a thing from her. That woman's clever, Rhoda, and she's dangerous. You'd better let her alone. Why, she's got you half fooled already."

At that, since it wasn't feasible to shake him till his teeth rattled, she turned and left him with a rush.

She didn't burst any worse than that, but she must have been looking a bit upset, for her boss asked her as she came into his office what sort of villain had been pursuing her that morning.

"Oh, not a real villain," she told him. "The sort that would tell you it hurt him worse than it did you."

On the strength of this she went on to ask him whether it would be very serious if she were late coming back from lunch. "A woman wants me to lunch with her who says she hasn't seen me since I was a child, and I don't know how long it will take."

The boss said she needn't hurry back and pointed out that she was entitled, since she'd worked one evening this week, to the whole afternoon if she wanted it.

She said she thought she did, and that was settled.

Now if Martin didn't waylay her as she was setting out to lunch with Claire, she'd be all right.

Unreasonably she was a little disappointed that he was nowhere about, not even in the offing, when she set

out at noon to her rendezvous. Thanks to his bossy disposition this morning she'd got none of the facts that she wanted out of him. Was it all his fault, though? She wouldn't have wanted him, would she, to take it for granted that she was the sort of girl who picked up rides to work whenever she had a chance? And instead of explaining she'd flared up at him. Her red hair again! The next time she saw him she'd tell him she was sorry.

She mustn't waste time thinking about him now, though—except as a warning not to lose her temper again. Her only reason for going to lunch with the woman was, as she had told Martin, to discover what it was all about; why these people she'd never heard of before wouldn't let her alone. She'd get nowhere by acting suspicious or by asking skeptical questions. The more confidently this Claire Cleveland took her for a light-wit the more she'd be likely to give away.

CHAPTER V

MARTIN WAS RIGHT

THE first thought that flashed into her mind when she saw the woman who was sitting at the specified table was that there must be some mistake about it. Noting the black hat and the dark blue dress didn't altogether do away with it, either. She'd expected a very different-looking person. This woman looked—rather nice. She had delicate features and blue eyes, and you'd guess her age in the early twenties—well, twenty-five—or not much over.

The instant she saw Rhoda she got up and came around the table to meet her. "I'd know you anywhere, Miss McFarland!" she said. "I was sure I wasn't mistaken. You're your father's daughter, all right."

There flashed into Rhoda's memory, something Martin had said about the woman at the Alhambra; that she looked younger, somehow, than her voice sounded. It settled any possible doubt about her identity. This woman's voice was hard and metallic,

with the silver plating worn off in spots.—She mustn't be thinking things like this! She must talk! She had a rehearsed line that would do. "It's perfectly marvelous to meet some one who knew my father," she said.

"Let's not try to talk," the woman suggested cozily, "until we've settled the important question of lunch."

Her manners, Rhoda reflected, belonged with her voice rather than with her looks. She insisted on ordering an extravagant lunch, and the way she overrode Rhoda's protest was rather too self-satisfied. She wasn't merely vulgar, though. There was a lot more to her than that. Martin had said she was clever and dangerous and he was probably right.

"I guess the first thing you'll want to know," she began as soon as they were rid of the waiter, "is how I found you. It was pure luck—if there is such a thing as luck, really. I saw you the other night at the Alhambra—that is, I thought it was you, only it seemed too good to be true. You were dancing with a gentleman I know, Mr. Max Lewis, and as soon as I got a chance I asked him about you. But it turned out he didn't know very much about you, himself. So I told him he'd got to find out for me, and yesterday

he sent me your address. I don't know yet how he found it out."

Rhoda heard an edge in the hard voice that suggested she wanted to know. "Oh, Babe must have told him," she said. "He brought her home that night. We live together, you see."

Then, with a rush, she went on into another speech she'd rehearsed. It was better to get it over with. "You must be wondering why I changed my name. You see, I wasn't of age when my father died. And I didn't want a lot of people bothering and interfering—telling me what I could do and what I couldn't. And I thought it would be easier to be let alone if I changed to Rhoda White. I could change back now, of course, only there isn't any reason why I should."

"Well, I'm glad it didn't bother you that I knew!" (She wasn't! Her voice gave her away every time. It was flat now with disappointment over the loss of a weapon she'd counted on.) "You won't mind then, if I call you Miss McFarland?"

"Not a bit! My best friends know it's my real name.—Only why don't you call me Rhoda?" She hoped her voice didn't give her away, too. The next moment she had to manage to call her companion Claire.

"I hope you've got time to-day for us to get started really making friends," Claire said when this basis had been established.

"I don't have to go back to the office at all this afternoon," Rhoda told her. It sounded like an answer.

"I'm a working girl, myself," said Claire, "or I have been until lately. Are you a stenographer? That's what I was. There may be ways that look easier, but in the long run they don't pay. Whereas now you take me, I was never out of a good job, and the last man I worked for gave me a tip on the stock market that I made enough out of so that I don't have to work any more—ever, unless I like. He owed it to me, all right. I'd made him more than that. I'd practically managed all his affairs for six years."

Rhoda's unasked question must have showed in her face. Claire took a deliberate drink of water and then went on as if she'd never stopped. "It was easy, though; didn't take near all my time and I used to do outside work—afternoons and sometimes evenings. That's how I happened to work for your father."

"Oh, I see," Rhoda agreed brightly. "I remember how often he used to go back to work evenings. I always hated to have him do it."

"You poor kid! You must have been lonesome!"

Rhoda felt her face burning as if it had been slapped. This woman's profession of sympathy was an insult she couldn't stand. She looked down at her plate and managed to swallow a few morsels of the food that was on it. When she thought she could command her voice she broached the main subject of their interview.

"You asked in your letter about a paper you had given him to keep for you."

Claire heaved a sigh. "Yes," she assented, "I suppose we'll have to talk about that and get it over. I hate to do it but I've simply got to get that paper—if it's still in existence. You don't suppose it's been destroyed, do you?"

"I haven't destroyed any of my father's papers," Rhoda told her. "If yours was among them when he died it's still there."

"Well, I hope they're in a good safe place. The thing I gave him ought to be in the bank."

"They're not in the bank. There was a whole trunkful of them and I sealed it up just as it was. I know it's perfectly safe, though. If you'll tell me what your paper was like, I'll try to find it for you. It'll be in a sealed envelope, won't it, with your name written on it?"

"No," Claire said shortly. "I don't think it will. At least, it wasn't that way when I gave it to him.—I wanted him to read it, himself, you see."

"What sort of paper was it?"

The woman, despite her pretended hesitations and reluctances, was perfectly ready with her answer. Rhoda listened intently for a sentence or two and then more or less switched off her mind to other things. It was glaringly evident she was lying.

The gist of the short story was that a wicked man had wronged her years ago when she was a mere girl. The paper was, it seemed, a sort of confession which she had, somehow, forced him to give her. Its value to her was that it showed her to have been really innocent—though if she had been wronged in the usual way it was hard to see what good the exhibition of this document would do her with anybody. Rhoda asked no questions however and pressed for no details.

Claire's reason for wanting her paper so desperately after all these years was not the least remarkable part of the narrative. She was planning to be married and she had reason to believe that her enemy meant to try to prevent it by telling the man some lies about her. But if she had his confession to confront him with, he wouldn't dare say a word to her fiancé.

The maddening thing about it all to Rhoda was that it seemed to be getting her no nearer even to a plausible surmise as to what the woman was really after. Could there possibly be something in that old hat trunk that these people wanted? She bitterly regretted that she hadn't sat up all last night going through it. She'd considered doing that but the thought of Babe and to what furious pitch her curiosity would be roused by such a procedure had served her as an excuse for not doing it.

But even if there *were* something—or if they believed there was, which would come to the same thing—how could they expect to get it by telling her a story that sounded as if it had come out of one of Babe's magazines—*True Confessions* or something like that. She hoped her face looked as if she were believing it all but she was afraid it didn't.

"I can see how badly you must want it," she said, when the story was finished. "I'll try my best to find it for you."

"Will it take very long?" Claire asked. "Before you can start looking for it, I mean. Of course you can't tell how long it will take you to find it."

"No," Rhoda assured her. "I'll go at it as soon as I get home this afternoon."

"That certainly is mighty sweet of you," Claire burst out, with a sudden suffusion of warmth. "It seems a shame to make you so much trouble—I'll tell you what we might do," she added. "Let me go along with you and help you look. I could probably find it quicker than you could because I know just what to look for."

The attempted casualness of the suggestion may have been a little overdone. Whether for that reason or another there flashed into Rhoda's memory, as clearly as if she were hearing it over the radio, a question Martin had asked her that morning: "What does she want to do; go over your father's papers and pick out what she likes?" It was a moment before she could trust her voice to answer and even then it didn't sound quite right.

"Oh, that won't be necessary," she said. "I'm sure I can find it if it's there. And it won't be any trouble at all."

Claire forebore to press the matter, and indeed Rhoda couldn't be sure that she really showed any disappointment. She must be disappointed, of course. There must be something in that old trunk that these people wanted. As soon as she could decently get away she'd have to go home and try to find out what it was.

She mustn't seem in a hurry, though. She didn't want to advertise to Claire the fact that she saw through her. They had to talk about something, since they were waiting for the next course—something in a chafing dish that the waiter was fussing over at the near-by serving table. Luckily Claire provided her with a topic by asking a question about Babe: "Who was she, the girl Mr. Lewis had brought home the other night?"

Was the woman in love with Max, Rhoda wondered, and uncontrollably jealous of him? It seemed a little like that, since her questions didn't sound idle, as she evidently meant them to. That would be worth thinking about afterward. Meanwhile Babe was a safe topic of conversation.

In the middle of it, though, Claire glanced at her watch and started a little. "Will you excuse me a moment, dearie?" she said. "I told a friend of mine that I didn't know whether I had a date for lunch to-day or not.—I didn't, of course, until I knew whether you'd come.—And I said I'd call them up before one o'clock and let them know."

Her departure worried Rhoda a little, principally because she had only about two dollars with her. What if Claire had fled and left her with that enormous

lunch to pay for! Really Claire wasn't gone very long but her return when she came was such a relief that for a minute Rhoda almost thought she liked her.

But this state of feeling didn't last long. Claire's manner had changed a little and had become vaguely disquieting. She talked between and during mouthfuls all through the rest of the meal, about anything or nothing: about food, the specialties of this and other restaurants; cafés; prohibition; night-clubs; men, especially the sort that a girl had to watch her step with. They were much the same subjects, Rhoda recognized, that Babe liked to run over, but this woman discoursed upon them with a hateful difference.

The meal seemed interminable. There was a salad after the chafing dish, and an elaborate sweet in a tall glass after that, with coffee still to come. Why, Rhoda asked herself desperately, had she been such an idiot as to admit that she wasn't going back to the office? She'd left herself without an excuse for running away, and she must see it through.

It dragged to an end at last. But when, having set down her empty demi-tasse, Rhoda moved back her chair a little as a preliminary to saying she must go, Claire suddenly found that she had something left to say.

"You know, dearie, there was one thing in my letter that I haven't told you about, and I want to before you go. There isn't any rush, is there? I hope not. Because it might sound kind of foolish unless I could tell you all about it."

"No," Rhoda had to admit, "I'm not in any special hurry."

On the strength of that Claire got out her cigarettes, offered them to Rhoda, and when they had been declined, apologetically and very deliberately lighted one herself.

"I said in my letter," she began at last, "that if any stranger tried to communicate with you in any way, I hoped you wouldn't answer him until you'd had this talk with me. You haven't, have you?"

"No, I guess not," Rhoda told her, alert again and answering as casually as she could. "I don't believe I know what you mean. What sort of communication?"

"You haven't seen it then," Claire said, with a sigh of relief, "or you'd know. It was just a guess of mine and maybe I'm all wrong. This dirty old goat that I've been telling you about, the one that made me all my trouble—I've sort of got him on the brain, I guess. . . ." This much of what she was

saying, Rhoda reflected, was probably true. The hatred in the woman's voice sounded genuine, anyhow.

"Maybe he isn't doing it," Claire went on, "but it's exactly the kind of thing he would do. He's old and he's got rheumatism so bad he can't walk without two canes, but I bet he still likes young girls as much as he ever did. He always has got them whenever he could."

Rhoda found herself getting frightened. The old man who had given her and Babe a lift this morning had two canes with him in the car. There was some horrifying admixture of truth in the lies the woman was telling her.

"He must know about you," Claire went on smoothly, "because he was in business, in a way, with your father. I don't know very much about that except that he played your father about the dirtiest trick that a man could play on another man. For anything I know he may think your father left you something that he wants—something among his papers—but I don't believe it's that. I think it's because he knows you're young, and pretty, and have no one to look after you. Anyhow, when I saw the ad in the paper for Rhoda McFarland, it came over me like second sight that that must be Forster up to his old tricks again."

"Forster?" Rhoda asked. Her lips felt stiff but she seemed able to talk all right. "Has he been advertising for me? What sort of advertisement?"

"Oh, the regular sort that's in the personal columns, saying you'll learn something to your advantage by applying to so and so. That's good, if it's Forster who put in the ad. Of course I don't know that it's him. It hasn't got his name on it; just letters, like XYZ. That's enough in itself to show that he isn't on the level. Didn't your father ever tell you about him? I don't suppose he would, though."

Rhoda shook her head. It was under the fascination of terror that she asked, almost involuntarily, the question, "What sort of trick was it that he played on my father?"

"Why, it's my personal opinion," said Claire, "—though of course I don't know anything about it. It happened long before your father and I got acquainted—but it's my private opinion that Forster was somehow or other at the bottom of the whole thing: your father's trouble out in California, I mean."

To Rhoda it was as if a buried thing had reared its head after all these years and stared at her. Ever since her father's death there'd been an unacknowledged fear in the bottom of her mind that this would happen—

something like this. It had taken its first vague nightmare form when, as a child of fourteen, she'd read in the paper about another trial under the Mann Act. It had been a fear of finding something that would give form and body to this nightmare that had kept her from going over the papers in the old leather hat trunk the day after her father died. One of the first things she had done after her flight from the hotel, up in the little hall bedroom of her first boarding-house, had been to seal that trunk with strips of gummed paper all around the lid.

Her father's dying reference to his papers prevented her from destroying the thing. She kept it under her bed, and her daily glimpse of it when she made the bed was accompanied, of course, by no emotional disturbances whatever. After the burglary she'd looked at it to make sure it was undisturbed, but at that time, preoccupied by the loss of her three hundred dollars, she hadn't thought much about it.

She'd got a much worse jolt when Martin, in the course of his burlesque burglar hunt, had encountered it, and having, no doubt, thought it contained hats, had tried to move it and been patently perplexed by its great weight. If she'd tried to explain that sharp emotion—which she didn't do—the explanation would have been

that she didn't want Martin to have any contact, however unconscious, with the secret that had clouded the last years of her father's life, the thing that had driven him into hiding and made a broken man of him.

And yet, up to now, until she heard Claire Cleveland pronounce the word California, she'd been able in her sensible moments to remind herself that all she'd ever seen in the trunk had been laboratory notes and diagrams, to argue that in all probability it contained nothing else, and to promise herself that some day she would open it up, go through it methodically, and make an end of her nightmare once and for all.

But now the nightmare was true. These people—certainly Claire, and probably Forster and his nephew—had their connection with her father back in the days of the horror and for some unthinkable purpose of their own, wanted the thing dug up.

She sat there frozen. It was seconds before she could even turn her eyes from the woman's horrible face.

"You know about it, don't you?" Claire was saying. "You must know something about it. Why there wasn't hardly anything else in the papers at the time—especially the San Francisco papers. You don't want to take a thing like that too hard, though, dearie."

At that Rhoda managed to drag her hypnotized eyes away and turn them on her empty coffee cup.

"Of course, to hear people talk—dirty hypocrites—you'd think a thing like that had never happened before. It's happening all the time, only they don't happen to get caught. You must know yourself that a good-looking girl could get any man if she wanted him; practically any man. They're funny that way—most men are. But your father . . . Well, of course all I know is what he told me from time to time. But I've got a sort of hunch that it was different from the regular thing in his case. It's like I said. I think they put something over on him. Of course," she hastened to add, "I wouldn't want to be held to anything I couldn't prove, and naturally I couldn't prove one single thing about this. But if there *was* a nigger in the woodpile, it was this man Forster. And you can play that right across the board. There's no way that you could get back at him that I can see, because it was all over and done with long ago. But there's one thing you can do, and that's lay off from him if he tries to come around."

Rhoda heard her move her chair back a little and that broke the spell. Glancing up she saw the woman gazing thoughtfully at her watch.

"Well, I guess I've said my say," she concluded. "And I know you must be wanting to run along. I'm going to order a taxi. I can't take you anywhere in it, can I?" She hadn't quite said her say, though, for as she rose to leave the table she added, "You won't forget to look up that paper of mine, will you, dearie?"

Despite her panic, Rhoda was able to note that this had been a clear afterthought, and not a complete one, either. Claire hadn't told her where she lived.

Rhoda went home. She didn't know how she got there. Nor did she plan what she'd do when she did. She had no clear expectation of what she'd find. But by the time she had climbed the long flight of stairs and let herself into the studio with her latch-key and flown straight up to her little bedroom in the loft and looked under the bed, she was not really surprised to see that the trunk was gone.

CHAPTER VI

THE ENEMY'S LAIR

ONE thing, though, that the discovery of her loss did for Rhoda was to put an end instantly to her panic. The cold, half-paralyzed nightmare fear that had had its grip on her ever since Claire Cleveland's reference to California was succeeded by a flame of hot anger. On her mind the effect of it was like the lifting of a fog. Even during the moment that she stood staring at the spot where the trunk had been she began to see what had happened, began asking herself questions and perceiving in a succession of flashes the answers to them.

Had Claire's invitation to lunch been anything but a trick to insure her absence from the studio while it was being broken into? It wouldn't have been necessary to do that, and Claire probably knew it. Max Lewis knew it, anyhow, for Babe had told him the night he brought her home that she and Rhoda worked all day at *The News,* and that Doris and Isabel were

off on a tour with their ballet. No, Claire had asked her to lunch in order to find out something.

What could she have found out? Not much, certainly. Rhoda was sure she hadn't told anything important. Wait a minute, though! She had said that none of her father's papers had been destroyed. She'd said, in answer to a question, that they weren't at the bank. There was a whole trunk full of them, she'd said, and she had sealed up the trunk. In other words, she'd volunteered the fact—fool! Silly, babbling fool!—that a sealed-up trunk was the thing to look for.

But had she said that it was in the studio? She couldn't remember having said that in so many words, but she must have admitted it by inference, since Claire had suggested coming home with her and helping in the search for the paper she wanted. Had Claire expected her to accept an offer like that? Probably not very seriously, but she might have regarded it as a chance worth taking. Anyhow, it hadn't been until after Rhoda had declined this offer—giving away her own suspicion, no doubt, hand over fist—that Claire had remembered the friend who was waiting for her to telephone him.

"Them," she'd said, though; not "him." Did that really mean there were two of them: Max and his

uncle, Forster? Most likely not. Claire's hatred of old Forster had seemed real enough. It had probably been nothing but Claire's nice-minded way of avoiding the admission that her friend was a man. It must have been Max she'd telephoned to, waiting at a telephone somewhere for Claire's instructions.

His attempt yesterday to find the papers they wanted had been unsuccessful, because he hadn't known what to look for. So he'd taken her three hundred dollars instead. Did Claire know that? she wondered. That might be worth thinking about later, but she hadn't time to follow it out now. Max had tried again to-day, with better information, remembering, likely enough, just where he'd seen the sealed-up trunk the day before, and had succeeded without any trouble at all. It had just happened, within the past hour, thanks to her own plain imbecility in giving everything away.

She'd been furious this morning with Martin for warning her against going to lunch with Claire. The woman was clever and dangerous, he'd said, and she'd better let her alone. And she'd wanted to shake him for saying that.

She hated the thought of telling him what had happened, even while she was wishing he were here at her

elbow now telling her what to do. Well, couldn't she think of anything, do anything, for herself? Was she going to just sit down and let that pair of crooks get away with it? They were probably up at Claire's flat now gloating over their booty, grinning about how easy she'd been.

It was what Martin had overheard them planning night before last at the Alhambra. And now after one failure, despite the repeated warnings she'd had, they'd got what they wanted.—Unless, somehow, she could make them give it up.

But what chance was there of that? She wouldn't call the police. She couldn't do that, with the story of her father's disgrace involved in the matter, and they knew it. That's what they were counting on. They'd been too clever for her; not Max, but Claire. The mere fatuous smirk on Max's beefy handsome face was enough to tell anybody that there was no intelligence behind it. He took Claire's orders, in spite of the rich uncle Martin thought he was afraid of.

Forster! The old man who had given her and Babe the ride down-town in his limousine that morning. That hadn't been chance, of course. He'd been trying to find her and he'd succeeded somehow. He was playing a hand of his own in this game.

Her body stiffened under the impact of an idea. Could she use him as an ally against the other pair? Claire was afraid of him too, she thought. She must be, to hate him like that. Anyhow, she'd done everything she could to keep Rhoda from going to him. She'd warned her in the letter against answering his advertisement, and had rubbed the warning in to-day at lunch. Well then, why not go to him now, as quickly as a taxi could take her to the Worcester Hotel? That was where Martin said he lived. Take Claire's letter along as a bit of documentary evidence.

She was aware that there might be objections to the plan, but she was in no mood to stop to consider them. She got Claire's letter out of the drawer of the writing desk, crammed it into her ulster pocket—she hadn't yet taken off her outdoor wraps,—slammed the studio door behind her and darted down the two long flights of stairs to the street.

"Worcester Hotel," she said to the taxi driver, who pulled up to the curb when she signaled him.

It was quite a ride—the better part of a mile, at least—and though she didn't want to chill with wet blankets the fine warm resolution that possessed her, she couldn't help doing it.

Forster might not be a desirable ally even if Claire

hated him. He might be as bad as she said he was. He might have been her father's arch-enemy. There wouldn't be much satisfaction in spoiling Claire's and Max's game if doing that involved delivering herself over, tied hand and foot, into the power of a man like that.

And could she spoil their game? Could she convince Forster that Claire and his nephew were conspiring against him? To what extent had Claire given herself away in the letter?

She got it out to read it, but her gaze didn't go beyond the first two lines: Claire's address written across the top. Claire's flat—or was it Max's? Was Claire his mistress? That was what the relation looked like certainly. She was that sort of woman, all right, with her story of the wicked man who had ruined her when she was a mere girl, and the confession she'd extorted from him. And now she was thinking of getting married and wanted it.

Rhoda froze again like a pointer getting wind of a prairie chicken. Had that statement been a careless bit of truth? Did she want to marry Max? And was she afraid that Forster would disinherit him if she did?

With another plunge, physical as well as figurative,

Rhoda opened the front window and spoke again to the chauffeur.

"I've changed my mind," she said. "Here's the address I want you to go to." And she read him Claire's.

She hadn't a doubt she'd find the pair of them there, up to the elbows in her father's papers.

"I think," she'd tell them, "that when you've heard what I say you'll give me back my trunk and everything that's in it, unless there's really something there that belongs to you. If you do, I don't care whether you marry Max or not. But if you don't give it back to me and take it down and put it into my taxicab, I'll drive straight to the Worcester. And I'll tell his uncle about everything that's happened in the last two days." Something like that, though exactly what she said would have to depend on what they did. Her bomb would be compounded somehow of her knowledge, unsuspected by them, that the Forster who had been advertising for her was Max's uncle and her guess that Max was the man Claire wanted to marry.

There was a third ingredient, too, that could make it more explosive: the fact that Forster had already found her and had brought her down to work this morning in his limousine.

The building before which her taxi pulled up was an oldish, three-story stone house, remodeled, as its two front doors indicated, into flats. Rhoda was trembling a little as she got out, but she didn't feel afraid. And she made it sound almost like a joke when she said to the taxi-driver, "Wait, please. I don't think I'll be long. But if you do hear anybody screaming for help in there, come in and see who it is."

There was a momentary delay after she rang Claire's bell—hers was one of the top flats—before the buzzer released the catch on the vestibule door, but Rhoda heard a door open at the top of the house the instant she started up the stairs. A little surprising, that was. She hadn't expected them to be eager to receive visitors just now; had wondered indeed whether they'd let her in at all. Perhaps they wouldn't when they saw who she was. She ran up the two flights and was panting when she got to the top.

The woman alone was waiting for her. Max wasn't in sight.

"What do you want?" Claire asked sharply when she saw who it was. But almost in the same breath she tried to change her tactics, adding with an uneasy laugh, "Heavens, I didn't expect you to find my paper as quick as that!" Her color had changed under her

make-up, though, in a sickly way that made Rhoda think of lead poisoning.

She must get inside Claire's door, that was the first thing to do, so she replied, not to the question but to the succeeding remark. "Yes," she said, making her voice sound as innocent and as amiable as she could, "it must seem rather sudden."

At that Claire stepped back unwillingly from the doorway, and Rhoda followed her into the rather large room that seemed to be all there was to the apartment, except for an alcove that formed an L, which she couldn't see into. That was where Max was most likely. Rhoda herself shut the door behind her.

"Well?" Claire asked. Again her manner was openly hostile. Then as Rhoda, without speaking, took a deliberate look around the room, she asked again, "What do you want? What's the matter with you?"

"I've come," said Rhoda, "to get my trunk."

"Your trunk? Say, are you crazy? What makes you think I've got your trunk?" She tried to laugh, but it only showed how frightened she was. She couldn't even resist casting a sort of desperate glance around behind her—toward the alcove, Rhoda assumed, though it seemed more as if she was looking toward the front window.

Rhoda hesitated a little over her answer to the woman's question. If Max was in the alcove she wished he'd come out. It was hard to know where to begin unless she knew whether he was there or not.

Her hesitation seemed to anger Claire, or to reassure her, she couldn't be sure which. "Look here," she went on truculently, "you can't get away with stuff like this. I don't even know what you're talking about. Are you trying to tell me you've lost a trunk and you think I've got it?"

"I'm going to tell you what I think," Rhoda said, "and I'm going to tell you some of the things I know.

"Night before last, at the Alhambra, when Max Lewis told you that I was the girl all right, because my first name was Rhoda, you told him to find out where I lived."

"I told you that myself this noon," Claire broke in. "What's that got to do with it?"

"And you told him," Rhoda went on, "not to waste any time about it, because I might see Mr. Forster's advertisement any day and answer it." Rhoda could see that this bit of information startled her and she went on a little more confidently. "He did find out where I lived by going home that night with Babe, and he found out that the studio was empty all day because

she told him we both worked and the other girls were away. He tried to find out whether my name wasn't Rhoda McFarland, but she didn't tell him. Yesterday afternoon the studio was broken into. The burglar didn't find any papers, because he didn't know where to look. But he did find three hundred dollars of mine, and he took that."

Rhoda's guess had been right. Claire didn't know about the three hundred dollars. The color of her face changed again under its rouge and liquid powder so that she looked once more as if she'd been poisoned. "You're crazy," she cried, "that's what you are! Crazy!"

"But to-day," Rhoda went on, "after I'd told you that my father's papers were in the trunk and sealed up, and after you'd gone out and telephoned . . ."

"You think Max went and got the trunk, do you, and that he brought it here?"

"Yes," Rhoda said. "And I think he's in that alcove with it now."

The woman gave a vicious laugh. "All right," she said, "go and see for yourself. If you can find Max or the trunk, you're welcome to both of them. Go and look, and then get out. I've been insulted about long enough."

This wasn't the way Rhoda had expected the scene to work out. She was assailed by a sudden doubt that the trunk might not be in the alcove after all, nor Max either. She'd be in a hideously uncomfortable position if she went and looked and nothing was there. Yet she couldn't go away without looking. This might be nothing but a magnificent bluff by Claire.

"Thank you," she said, "I will go and look." But it took all the resolution she had to set her legs in motion down the room.

The alcove contained a bed, a tawdry, oriental-looking affair, too low for the trunk to be under, a couple of chairs and a dressing-table, but no trunk, no litter of papers, and no Max.

"Go as far as you like," said Claire who had followed her. "Perhaps they're hidden in my closet or in the bathroom."

Rhoda was on the point of giving it up. She'd made a bad guess, that was all, not as to the woman's responsibility for the theft of her trunk, but as to the way she'd worked it. Claire's self-confidence, her sense of being top dog seemed, now, to be perfectly real.

But the bathroom door stood ajar and Rhoda's glance had gone that way as Claire finished speaking. It looked like a rather large room for its purpose. More

than just a bathroom. She'd take a look, anyhow, and make sure. She was in the act of going in, but not yet clear of the door, and Claire was at her elbow, when the sharp jingle of a bell somewhere in the apartment startled them both. That is to say, it startled Rhoda; it paralyzed Claire. Her hard blue eyes seemed to bulge right out of her head. But that lasted only an instant. With a convulsive movement Claire gave her a tremendous push that sent her staggering clear across the tiled floor to the farther wall, whipped the key out of the inner face of the door, slammed the door, and locked her in. The bell gave a second peal just as the bolt clicked home.

Just as instinctively as she had recovered her balance and saved herself a fall, Rhoda darted across the room and tugged, ineffectually of course, at the locked door. But she began thinking in time to suppress the impulse to beat upon the door and demand vociferously that she should be let out. Unless she kept quiet she couldn't hear what was going on. By putting her ear to the door she could hear very well indeed.

She heard Claire open the door—the door she had come in by, Rhoda didn't doubt; there was a betraying creak to one of its hinges—but there was no sound of the heavy footsteps on the stairs that would have

heralded the lugging in of her trunk. Claire must have thought it was the trunk coming, though, or she wouldn't have locked her up in the bathroom. The silence, which had lasted half a dozen seconds, perhaps, was again broken by the ring of the bell, persistent this time and prolonged. It wasn't the door-bell at all: it was the telephone.

Rhoda heard the door slam shut and the rush of Claire's feet across the room. It was odd that in her own flat she should have mistaken the bell. She'd been expecting the door-bell, that was why.

The instrument was just around the corner of the alcove, near enough so that Rhoda could still hear the throb of the bell after Claire cut it off by lifting the receiver off the hook. With the resonance as good as that she hoped she might be able to hear not only Claire but the speaker at the other end of the line. This bit of luck, however, didn't come off. Either he was speaking very low or Claire had the receiver glued tight to her ear.

Claire said, "Hello?" and then a moment later, "Yes. Who is this? What is it you want?"

An unfamiliar voice, evidently asking if this was Miss Claire Cleveland.

The stranger must have said his say pretty con-

cisely, for after quite a short pause Claire cried out in a tone of the liveliest astonishment, "What's that? What are you talking about? Who are you, anyway?" And again, after listening a little longer, "Say, are you trying to be funny?"

Apparently, though, it wasn't a joke. Certainly not from Claire's point of view. For the next time she spoke her voice was raucous with anger, and what she said a mere incoherent jumble of uncompleted questions.

Right in the middle of this the person on the other end of the line must have hung up, for Claire began suddenly and furiously rattling the hook. "Where did that call come from?" she demanded when she'd attracted the operator's attention. But of course the operator couldn't tell her.

There was a silence after that; a dead unbroken silence. The woman couldn't still be standing there before the telephone, yet Rhoda hadn't heard her move away. When it had lasted as long as she could endure it she began pounding on the door.

To her surprise Claire came at once and unlocked it. She herself pulled it open and they stood face to face. Whatever remonstrances Rhoda meant to make were silenced by the woman's look. She looked as if she'd forgotten that Rhoda was there; forgotten what

she'd come for; forgotten almost who she was. She looked at her blankly for a moment and then with a kind of terrifying intentness, as if trying to decide whether she had, could possibly have, any connection with or knowledge of that mysterious message over the telephone.

Evidently her conclusion was negative, for with a faint shrug she turned away. "You can come out now," she said, "if you like. And go! Go home! There's nothing here that's any business of yours. And God knows I don't want to keep you here."

Rhoda didn't hesitate. The smoldering fury in the woman was not only formidable; it constituted a sort of guarantee of the truth of what she said. Rhoda went, with the best appearance of dignity she could muster. Probably it didn't look like a flight, but until she got into her taxi, it felt like one.

There was something immensely reassuring about the chauffeur of that taxi. He smiled when he saw her and said, "Well, I didn't hear you yelling for help."

"I didn't," she said, "though I thought for a minute I was going to. Drive away from here," she said when she'd got inside, "but as slowly as you can, and not very far. I want to think."

Before they'd gone half a block her thoughts re-

sulted in a question. "Could you follow anybody?" she asked.

"I could until it got too dark, unless they had too fast a car for me. Do you want to follow somebody?"

He'd turned the corner now on the boulevard, and he pulled up at the curb while he waited for her answer. A tall flat building on the corner cut off any possible view from Claire's windows.

"I think," Rhoda said, "that the woman I want to see is coming out in a few minutes, and I want to know where she goes."

"Well," he said, "that's easy. I'll wait here with my flag up. You go back and slip into one of the side vestibules in this flat building where you can keep an eye on her door. She may order a taxi by telephone, or she may walk down here and pick one up. If she does that she'll ask me and I'll tell her I'm engaged. That'll work out all right if you aren't in too big a hurry coming around the corner."

Claire, it appeared, wasn't in a hurry. Time went pretty slowly for Rhoda, who felt like a sneak thief waiting in that vestibule, and she was on the point of giving it up when she saw another taxi drive up to Claire's door. But after that things happened swiftly.

Claire came down almost at once, got into her taxi,

drove to the boulevard and turned south, down-town. In another minute Rhoda, in her own taxi, was following at a safe distance. It was almost too easy to be exciting. Down the boulevard to the parkway, and then branching to the right down the park's western boundary, she saw the other taxi stop and Claire get out at the Worcester Hotel.

"All right," Rhoda said to the chauffeur of her taxi. "You can stop here, too. And this time you needn't wait."

She didn't know what she was going to do, in there, but it was clearly the place where things were coming into focus.

CHAPTER VII

STEALING AN IDEA

MARTIN had got one thing out of his otherwise barren encounter with Rhoda that morning, and this was his day's story for the paper. At least he wouldn't have got it if he hadn't been standing at the curb to see the limousine that Babe and Rhoda arrived in drive up. The license plate on that car caught his eye and fixed itself in his mind by virtue of a small oddity that he noted about it. It was a four number arrangement of nines and eights which would make just as good sense upside down as right side up, only it would make different sense.

Probably it was his exasperated determination to dismiss Rhoda and her wrong-headedness and her red hair completely from his mind that caused this notion of an inverted license plate to fructify swiftly into the amusing sort of tale of misadventure that he specialized in. It was what the editor liked, and the fact that he made it up out of whole cloth didn't matter a bit.

He typed away at it industriously all the morning. When it was done, since he knew it was good, he found himself in a placable enough humor to turn back to the Rhoda incident and consider dispassionately what had gone wrong with it.

She'd certainly begun treating him in a cold and disdainful manner before he'd said a word to her. Of course there had been a couple of wise-cracks from Babe Jennings that might have annoyed her, but why should she take that annoyance out on him? And anyhow, what right had she to be annoyed? She *had* allowed herself to be picked up for a ride down-town just as much as Babe had. Probably, though, she didn't realize as clearly as Babe did the sort of reward that old billy-goats in limousines usually exacted for their beneficence. And Babe had probably got her in for it, as far as that went. Very likely she hadn't liked the idea of getting into that car any better than he had liked the sight of her getting out of it.

Well then, why hadn't she told him so? Oh, she wouldn't have done that, of course—make an excuse for herself at Babe's expense. He hadn't asked for an excuse, to be sure, but had he looked as if he wanted one? Well, perhaps he had. Anyhow, whoever's fault it was, the result of the silly little flare-up

had been that Rhoda was going off to her lunch with that woman—probably had already gone by now—entirely unprovided with the facts she'd asked him for. She'd said twelve o'clock, hadn't she? It was already twenty minutes past. Too late for his information to do her any good.

This conclusion, though, didn't keep him from trying to puzzle out the problem for himself. The two problems, for it seemed to him that they were probably separate.

What was the woman up to, and what advantage was she trying to get over Forster? And, in the second place, what was Forster up to himself?

Under his eye, as he sat musing, was the scribbled sheet of scratch-paper on which he'd drawn the license plate right side up and upside down in figuring out his story. It had been a handsome car, all right, that the girls had had a ride in, even if they *had* had to sit on the little folding seats. Rather comic, that was, now he thought about it. And a bit queer too. Babe's observations on life were sound enough as far as they went, even though her way of phrasing this one had annoyed him at the time. What *had* the old billy-goat stopped his car for, if not for the sensation of having a nice young thing sitting close beside him?

He was still staring at the license number of that car. Suddenly, under an impulse too fanciful to bear arguing about, he decided to look up the owner. It wouldn't do any harm to find out who the old bloke was.

When he found a few minutes later that the car was registered as the property of C. J. Forster he felt for a few seconds as if he must be a victim of a practical joke. What the devil!

He telephoned up to Rhoda's department to find out if or when she'd gone out to lunch and when, if they knew, she was expected back. When they told him she wasn't coming back that afternoon at all, he crammed on his hat, squirmed into his overcoat as he ran down-stairs, and started out for the Tip-Top Inn.

This, as may be inferred from its name, is reached by riding up in an elevator. It comprises, really, a number of separate restaurants all opening into a central lobby, furnished with a cigar stand, telephone booths, and a leather sofa or two where you may wait for the person who is coming for lunch with you.

Martin, considering his plan of action on the way over, had decided to wait in this lobby until Rhoda came out. He had thought of having her paged,

sending in a note asking her to come out in the lobby and speak to him. But this course, though it would have served his impatience better, had two serious disadvantages. One was that it would rouse the woman's curiosity and might make her more actively dangerous than she was now. The other was that if Rhoda came out from the table to hear his news, she'd stay only a minute or two and then go back to her companion. What he wanted was to carry her off. He could give their encounter at the elevator gate the appearance of being casual. He could appear to be in the act of leaving himself, and could very likely walk off with Rhoda without giving the woman anything much to feel suspicious about.

He hadn't yet settled down to his wait on the sofa—he was at the cigar stand buying some cigarettes—when a woman came up beside him and bought a telephone slug. He'd been a reporter long enough to repress the start her voice gave him, though it was a voice he knew, and he checked his impulse to turn and look at her, much as he'd have liked to. He never had had a really good look at her. Luckily she'd never seen him at all, nor heard his voice. On the strength of that reflection he bought a telephone slug too, went into the next booth to hers, dropped his nickel and called his own telephone number, which of course didn't answer.

He hoped he'd be able to hear what she said. If she'd left Rhoda in the middle of their lunch to come out and telephone, it was likely to be something interesting. He was reassured by the first half-dozen words she spoke. She was trying to speak low, but the sort of voice she had rasped right through the thin partition wall of the telephone booth. He hadn't got there in time to hear what number she called; indeed he was barely in time for the beginning of her conversation, for she'd got her party at once. Some one, he guessed, who'd been waiting for the call at the instrument.

"Yes, of course it's Claire," Martin heard her say. "Were you expecting a call from somebody else? Now listen, Max: you'll have to go and get it yourself. The other thing wouldn't work in a thousand years. . . . Well, because it won't, that's all. She's too cagey—like you said. So now it's up to you. . . . Why not? You were crazy to do it yesterday. . . . Yes, and it's a good thing I did, too. Because now I can tell you how to find it. Listen. It's in a trunk. Everything; all the dope. . . . I don't know, but you can tell because it's sealed up. Sealed. Get that? Sealed—like sealing wax. Don't try to open it. Bring it right along. The whole thing. And don't take your own car; get a taxi. Bring it right up to the flat and wait for me if I ain't there. I'll see that you have plenty of time but you

don't want to waste any. . . . Why, of course you'll do it. It's easier now than it would have been yesterday because you know what to look for. . . . Listen! You know you can't argue with me and you know why you can't. *Don't* you know it? . . . Oh, don't be silly. Of course I wasn't threatening you. Only, for Pete's sake, don't go yellow now when I'm putting it right in your hands. All right. Good-by."

Martin stayed in his booth until he'd seen her go back into the restaurant. Then he came out and turned a little uncertainly to the telephone directory. Max wasn't in it, he knew, for he'd tried to look him up. Rhoda had told him the woman's last name though: Cleveland, that was it. He'd gathered from the talk that the pair were living together. Probably that's where Max was now.

His thoughts were racing as he turned the pages of the directory. He'd have to be quick, but he mustn't waste time making any false moves. He couldn't have misunderstood the purport of the woman's message. Heavens, he'd seen the trunk himself. That little hat trunk under Rhoda's bed with the lid gummed down with strips of paper—to keep the moths out, he'd thought. He'd carelessly tried to push it aside with one hand and found he couldn't.

Here the address was—Claire Cleveland. That was one of those streets out near the Alhambra. That's how she'd happened to see Rhoda turning in. Lucky, just now, it was so far out. He could get to Rhoda's flat before Max could provided Max was starting from out there. And Rhoda's flat was the place for him to go. Just what he'd do when he got there wanted a little thinking about. But he could decide that in the taxi.

He found when he gave the address to the taxi driver that his teeth wanted to chatter. Well, it wasn't so strange. He'd done quite a various lot of more or less unlawful things since he'd begun being a reporter, but housebreaking hadn't been one of them. It looked now, though, as if that was what he had to do. He couldn't hope to deal with Lewis except from inside Rhoda's flat.

He wondered if that lock really would be as easy to open with a penknife as he'd told Rhoda it would. He hoped he had the start of Max. It might turn out a little awkward if he were digging away at the lock when Max came up the stairs. It might not be any too pleasant, even after he was fully established inside. Max was a powerful-looking brute. Martin remembered the solidity of that arm of his. And it would be

just like him to come armed with a gun and, if he were desperate enough, to use it.

They'd sounded rather desperate—at least the woman had—both night before last at the Alhambra and over the telephone to-day—relentless, anyhow—and Max would try to carry out her orders. She was holding something over him. "You know you can't argue with me and you know why." He was too much afraid of her probably to be afraid of any one else.

Would he be shrewd enough to guess, the question was, that Martin was as much a lawbreaker in that flat as he was? It might turn out an ugly sort of encounter if he did. Was there any way to avoid it? Suppose he stole the trunk himself? Got clean away with it before Max arrived, and left him to search in vain. No, that wouldn't do. He couldn't be sure of getting clean away. He might meet Max on the stairs. And even if he did get away he'd have no means of guarding or of warning Rhoda. She might come in and find Max there.

No, he'd have to break in and then he'd have to trust to luck to being able to bluff Max out. Max hadn't liked the job very well, himself. That had been plain enough from the way the woman had talked to him. Then, she'd spoken of his being yellow as if it were a phenomenon she was acquainted with.

But why had Max been eager to do the job yesterday? Martin sat forward on his seat and thumped his knee with his fist. Max *had* tried it yesterday, that was why. He'd gone there in defiance of Claire's orders looking for "it"—whatever it was. He hadn't found it and he'd been afraid to tell Claire. But then it was he who had found Rhoda's money and taken it. That was a queer thing for a rich man to do.

But how did he know that Max was rich? He was a rich man's nephew. It might be quite a different thing, especially if his uncle had quarreled with him. Three hundred dollars might make a tremendous difference to a man in a really deep hole and held down in it under the thumb of a harpy like that Cleveland woman.

His taxi turned the corner of Rhoda's street and he dismissed this train of thought with a jerk, though he was aware he hadn't quite got to the terminus. A hundred yards up the long block and, as well as he could guess, right in front of Rhoda's number, another taxi was pulled up at the curb. Had Max got here ahead of him after all? He couldn't have come all the way in from Claire Cleveland's flat as quickly as that, but it was no more than an unscrutinized assumption of Martin's that he had started from there.

"Pull up here and wait a minute," Martin told his chauffeur. It was not, he was aware, the heroic order to give, but, being no hero, only a thoroughly pragmatic reporter, he required time to think.

If Max was already in the flat there was nothing to be gained by following him. Even unarmed, Max could beat him to a pulp and would be able to identify him, besides, as one of Rhoda's allies. Call a policeman? That was no good either. Police intervention meant a story in the papers. And this, for some reason he could only half guess, was a horror to Rhoda.

But was that Max's taxi? There was no chauffeur in it, though the motor had been left running. The obvious inference was that the chauffeur had been tipped to go in and carry out luggage, such as a trunk.

Would Max have the nerve to ask a taxi driver to assist him in his burglary? Well, he might if he were smart enough. If he was yesterday's burglar, and especially if he'd noted the little hat trunk sealed up with gummed paper and remembered just where it was, he could feel in his pockets, say, casually, "Hell, I've come off without my key again," and spring the lock confidently and unexperimentally without arousing any suspicion in the chauffeur's mind.

He had just reached that point in his speculations

when they were confirmed by Max's emergence from the doorway, accompanied by the chauffeur lugging the trunk.

Martin said to his chauffeur, "That's the man I want. And I think I know where he's going, but I can't be sure enough to risk it. Follow him, will you?"

It made him feel frightfully cheap to give an order like that. But the heroic alternative offered no chance at all of success. Any attempt of his to get the trunk away from Max by force would look to both witnesses—his own chauffeur as well as Max's—like an unprovoked assault on a law-abiding citizen. He could think of nothing better than to tag along, make sure where the trunk went, and try to invent some way of bluffing this pair of conspirators out of their booty up in Claire's flat after she'd joined Max there. He had the ingredients for a pretty good bluff. He was convinced now that Max had stolen Rhoda's three hundred dollars the day before and that Claire knew nothing about it. And Forster might serve as a threat to hold over them, somehow.

Automatically, of course, he'd been watching the other taxi. Now as they approached the drive he was astonished to see it turn south instead of north; downtown instead of up. That wasn't the way to Claire's

flat. Yet her instructions to Max had been explicit that he take it there. Was Max starting something on his own account?—betraying his ally? Or had he observed that he was being followed and was he trying to throw off pursuit?

Keeping another car in sight in the flood of traffic on the boulevard with its four lanes each way and its stop lights isn't an easy thing to do. Martin noted with satisfaction that his chauffeur was clever at it and decided to take the man in, a little way in, on the game.

"I'm a reporter for *The News,*" he told him, "and that chap with the trunk is a peach of a story if I can get it. He isn't going where I thought he would, though."

"Probably going to one of the depots, isn't he, with that trunk," the chauffeur suggested.

"I believe you're right," Martin agreed. "If he is, the story is even better. But I've got to find out where he's going."

Their quarry showed no signs of consciousness that it was being followed. It pulled into the low lane at Jackson Boulevard and turned west. It crossed Dearborn Street, eliminating the Polk Street Station, and La Salle, where it would have turned for the New York Central.

"It will be the Union if its anything," said Martin's chauffeur.

"Where will he go with that trunk if he wants to check it?" Martin asked.

"It depends on whether he's got his ticket," the chauffeur told him. "If he hasn't, he'll stop and get it half-way down the ramp. If he has he'll go all the way down to the lower level."

Evidently Max hadn't his ticket, for his taxi stopped half-way down, pulling up a little beyond the entrance to the concourse. But the person who left the cab to buy the ticket was the chauffeur. Max apparently didn't want to leave his precious trunk until it was safely checked.

His caution simplified things a bit for Martin. He slipped out of his cab and followed the other chauffeur boldly up to the ticket window and stood at his elbow while the man bought a ticket and a lower berth, the number of which Martin noted, to New York on the Pennsylvania Limited that afternoon. In order not to give himself away he paused at the window himself long enough to ask when the next train went to Milwaukee and then returned as inconspicuously as he could to his own taxi. The other cab had already started down the ramp.

At a safe distance Martin followed and saw Rhoda's little hat trunk checked, saw Max drive away—unchecked, damn him!—with, no doubt, what was left of her three hundred dollars in his pocket. Those identical twenty-dollar bills that Martin had seen paid for the ticket had been very likely a part of the hoard in her bureau drawer. And he had stood looking on and not done a mortal thing! Well, what could he have done? What could he do now?

One thing he'd better do, without loss of time, was to pay off his own taxi while he could. He'd left the paper, in his haste this noon, without stopping to get some money that he needed. After he'd paid the sum the meter had been adding up so industriously, and tipped the driver a dollar (he couldn't, he figured, do less after taking the man's name on the chance he'd need him as a witness) he had just sixty cents left—and you could have bought him, as he stood at the curb watching the cab drive away, for just about that.

The obvious duty before him was to telephone Rhoda at the studio and tell her what he had seen happen: tell her, in brief, that he'd watched Max Lewis steal her trunk and check it for New York at the Union Station. She wouldn't ask him what he'd been doing all the while but the question would be in

her mind all the same. She might ask him what she could do about it.

The only plan in his mind up to now, was that they go around together to the city hall and swear out a warrant for Lewis's arrest, along with a writ of replevin for the trunk, and then be on hand with a plain clothes man when Lewis came to the station to take the train. There was time enough for that and it would be easy enough—except for the one fact that Rhoda herself would veto the plan.

He hadn't the faintest doubt of that. He remembered how she'd looked last night when he had been telling her about the morgue; they dug into that only, he had said, when something in the current news called for a reference to it. He didn't know—he'd deliberately avoided trying to find out—what file it was she was afraid might be looked into nor, exactly, what sort of secret it contained, but he remembered the deep earnestness in her voice when she'd begged him not to try to find out any more than she had told him and not to do anything that might change the life she'd been so happy in during the past two years.

Rather than risk that, she'd stand the loss of her little trunk just as she'd wanted to stand the loss of her three hundred dollars. And this precious pair of

crooks, Claire and Max, probably knew it and were banking on their immunity. The only way to get the better of them would be by a use of their own sort of methods. Steal the trunk back! If he were any good at all he could think up some way of doing that.

He considered various ways of accomplishing this crime—all of them obviously predestined failures. It wouldn't be necessary, though, to steal the trunk itself. If he could get into the baggage room and steal the check off the trunk, it wouldn't go to New York with Max, and Rhoda could come round with the key and identify it. Or if he were only an accomplished pickpocket he could steal Max's duplicate of the check. Or if he knew a reliable professional pickpocket whom he could hire for the job. . . . This sort of nonsense was getting him nowhere. Couldn't he think of something that would work?

He had been drifting aimlessly along the street in the general direction of his newspaper office, though he had no conscious reason for going back there, and presently he found himself standing outside a little ten-cent movie theater in Madison Street, staring in a sort of trance at the lurid poster on its billboard. It represented the so-called eternal triangle, a guilty pair surprised by the man's virtuous wife. She was defend-

ing the sanctity of the hearth with a small revolver and you could see from the way they cowered before her that they recognized the cogency of her argument. She had the same colored hair as Claire Cleveland—and a little of her look, too.

Martin's abstraction grew deeper and deeper. Eager patrons shouldered bruskly past him without rousing him. The girl in the cage cast sharp little glances his way and wondered whether she hadn't better have him moved on. But before she came to this decision he came to one of his own. He shook himself, a good deal the way a dog does, looked at his watch and went off to the nearest drug store to telephone to Claire.

CHAPTER VIII

HOW THE PLOT WORKED OUT

THE simple, but really rather thrilling one-act play which had its only performance at a few minutes past five that afternoon in the concourse of the Union Station, paid no royalties to the stark screen drama which was being exposed six times daily in the little movie theater on Madison Street. It is doubtful if the author of the movie, even if he had been in the audience at the play, would have perceived the plagiarism.

But the theft of that plot was the only crime that Martin had to commit that day. Strictly speaking there was no audience, for Martin did not dare come close enough to hear the lines, and Babe Jennings, who heard everything, was herself one of the important actors.

Babe had undertaken the part, though at short notice, with enthusiasm, once she'd convinced herself that Martin had not gone suddenly mad and after she had got the main lines of the scenario through her head.

She had extemporized a masterly excuse to the supervisor for leaving the office a little before four o'clock. She had dashed out to the studio in a taxi—all expenses were guaranteed by Martin—and, thanking goodness that Rhoda wasn't there to have his messages passed on to her, made a toilet as much like a million dollars as her street things ran to.

Her major resplendencies were calculated for the evening, of course, but even in her lesser glory she looked good to Max Lewis when he caught sight of her in the station—good enough to be going to Hollywood. He told her that while he sentimentally prolonged their handshake.

"I knew right off it was going to work," Babe told Martin afterward. "The minute I looked at him he began to swell up like one of those pigeons over at the Art Institute."

Her answer to his remark about Hollywood was that she was headed for a better place than that. She was starting off on the Limited to the big town. She thought he looked a little startled when she said that; wasn't sure that she didn't detect a faint cloud shadow of misgiving floating across his open countenance. So she stepped on the gas and burst into raptures about her trip.

She'd been saving up for this vacation for two years. And she was taking it late so that the little old burg would be running full time when she got there. She hadn't, she said, made any definite plan. She was feeling as loose as a nature dancer's clothes, and ready to take on anything that looked like a good bet. If the big burg felt about her the way she felt about it, she might decide to stay there. This jay town was getting on her nerves.

"What are you looking so funny about?" she concluded, closing in on her victim. "Are you going to hate to lose me as much as that?"

"I'm not going to lose you at all," Max told her. "That's the joke. I'm going to New York on the Limited myself. It's too bad, though, that you didn't tell me about it the other night," he added, with a smirk. "Then we could have fixed things up to be really sociable."

"Well, it was your own fault, dearest," she told him. "You were so crazy about another girl that night that you didn't give me a chance to tell you anything about poor little me."

"Nothing to that," he assured her impressively. "Nothing to that a-tall. I was finding out about her to oblige a friend. What car are you in? Let's see your ticket."

Babe cheerfully gave credit to Martin that this property was in place. She'd never have thought of the detail herself. She opened her handbag and got out one of those railway envelopes that they enclose tickets in. It had some stuffing in it too. But it didn't require to be opened, for on the face of it was written in indelible pencil, "Pennsylvania Limited—5:30—Car 408, Lower 10."

She held it out for him to see without, however, letting go of it. "Let's see yours," she said excitedly.

He got a similar envelope out of his breast pocket, but it had no car and berth numbers written on it and he had to get out his Pullman tickets for a look. She crowded close to him in order to see—quite a bit closer, in fact, than was strictly necessary. Also she saw more than was written on his ticket. She saw that he had a trunk check in the envelope.

"Why, Max," she cried, with a squeal of excitement, "we're in the same car! Look—408! Can you beat it?"

Except for the critical moment itself this was the one she'd feared the most. But the coincidence never staggered him.

"I'll tell the world you can't," he proclaimed enthusiastically. "Look here, Babe, what do you say? Can I swap my lower for the upper in your section?"

"Well," she told him judicially, "you never can tell till you try."

He seemed to find the answer satisfactory. "Say, girl," he remarked, "this is going to be some party! Don't put that up," he went on, noting that she was replacing her envelope in her handbag. "Let's go through and get on the train. Where's your suitcase?"

She was ready for that, too. "It's gone through with the red-cap," she told him. "Hasn't yours?" She went on putting away her ticket while she spoke, and as he nodded yes to her question she said, "Oh, there's no hurry. Let the crowd go through first. I hate being squeezed by people I don't know."

He did what she expected him to when she said that. She didn't dare risk a real look around but out of a corner of her eye she thought she saw where the woman stood watching them. She allowed herself to be drawn a little nearer the gate, but only a few steps. She didn't want to get into the thick of the crowd.

"I always get excited when I'm starting out on a trip," she confessed. "Can you feel my heart beat?"

Probably he could since it was going pretty fast, and the back of his big paw enveloping her hand was pressed against it more or less.

"I don't feel that way about every ride on the cars,

but I do about this one all right," he told her. "Come along. Get out your ticket again."

She moved clear of him as if to get room to undo her bag and again looked up. Yes, thank heavens, it was all right.

"Max," she said, sharp and low, "is that your wife looking at us?"

"Wife!" he echoed. "Say, Babe, where do you get that stuff?"

But he looked, and she, looking up at him, saw his face drain to the color of an unbaked pie. The woman swept down upon them and stood glaring from one to the other.

" 'Babe', eh?" she said with a ferocious grin. "I thought so."

She didn't say it very loud, though. Evidently she didn't care about attracting a crowd, herself.

"You yellow dog!" she went on to Max's address. "Trying to double-cross me, were you, and get away with a skirt? Well, you aren't smart enough, see? Give me the check of that trunk."

The poor boob was holding his ticket envelope in his left hand. Babe could see the hand shake. He didn't even try to say anything, just stood there as dumb as a catfish.

Babe intervened. "You're all wet," she told the woman. "You don't want to start anything you can't finish. I'm going to New York, and Mr. Lewis here was seeing me off. There's no law against that, is there?"

A feeble ray of hope lighted the murky misery of Max's face.

"That's absolutely true, what she says. I swear to heaven that's all I was doing—seeing her off."

"You always were a rotten liar," she said. "Give me the check of that trunk."

"I tell you there wasn't any trunk," he asserted frantically. "I went to find it and I couldn't. It wasn't there."

"Look here," Babe struck in again, "I've had enough of this. Sorry to get you in dutch, Max. Good-by."

She made as if to move off toward the gate, then darted back to him, crowding in front of the woman as she did so.

"Gosh," she panted, "I almost forgot! Give me my ticket."

He swallowed hard and said, "Your ticket?"

She flickered a wink at him. "Don't you remember? I gave it to you when you checked my trunk. Why, you've got it right in your hand."

He opened his dull eyes wide, more like a catfish than ever, and if she hadn't been too excited she'd have laughed outright at the mixture with the despair in them, of a sudden unbelievable hope.

He gave her the envelope without a word, and she, without another glance at either of the pair, scurried like a rabbit into the crowd around the gate.

Would they catch on and follow her and try to get the thing back by force? As a precaution against that, she put Max's ticket in her handbag and got out her dummy. But they didn't try it. Craning over shoulders in the crowd she was able to see the pair walking away together.

Just before she got to the gateman she slipped aside, and in another second Martin was hugging her.

"Gosh, Babe, you're a peach!" he said.

But if they were to keep Rhoda's trunk from taking an unnecessary and perhaps embarrassing trip to New York there wasn't any time to waste on compliments. "Wait right here," he told her, when she had given him Max's ticket and the precious trunk check, and darted off to find the baggage master.

"I want to get a trunk off the Limited!" he panted out to that official at the end of a sprint. "The young lady's changed her mind and isn't going."

Apparently emergencies like this were food and drink to the baggage master. Things began happening the way they happened at the paper when a story broke at the moment of going to press, and in less than ten minutes the hat trunk with its gummed-down lid hove in sight having a ride all by itself on a little electric platform truck. They wouldn't surrender it to Martin, though. It would have to be unlocked first and the contents identified. He was glad he hadn't told them it was his trunk. The young lady who had changed her mind had been a useful invention. He'd bring Rhoda round to get it in the morning.

He found Babe getting annoyed and under the impression that she'd been unwarrantably abandoned, so to pacify her he borrowed five dollars of her and took her into the station restaurant for food. His idea of the meal had been afternoon tea but it turned out a good deal more like a dinner. They were both ravenous after all the excitement.

Between mouthfuls they looked at each other admiringly. "We're pretty good, aren't we?" Babe said. "Gosh, I didn't know I could act like that."

"Even considering that I stole the plot," said Martin, "I think it's one of the best stories I ever wrote."

They rather forgot Rhoda in their complacency, but

not for long. They had a telephone instrument brought to their table so that they could call up and tell her the good news, but it seemed she wasn't there to hear it.

"It's funny," Martin commented uneasily. "Isn't she usually home by this time? It's after six. You don't suppose anything's happened to her, do you?"

"Oh, don't be an old hen!" Babe admonished him. "What could have happened to her?" All the same he could see she was as uneasy as he was. They wasted no time about paying their bill and getting a taxi.

The studio was dark when Babe unlocked the door, and their calls evoked no response.

"Something *has* happened to her," Martin said, with sober conviction.

But the telephone rang just then and enabled Babe to say as she darted across the room to answer it, "Silly, there she is now. Turn on the light, will you? It's right by the door."

"Hello!" he heard Babe saying as he fumbled for the switch. "Is that you, Red? Well, what's the matter with your voice? I can't hear you. Yes, Martin's right here. Do you want to talk to him?"

He'd found the light at last, and now he hurried across the room. But before he could take the receiver from Babe's hand he heard her say, "Red, what

is it? What's the matter? Where are you, anyhow?" And by the time he had crowded into her place, the thread of communication had been broken.

"Number, please?" the operator said when he rattled the hook. She couldn't tell where the call they had lost had come from.

CHAPTER IX

THE SPIDER

IT HAD been the mere momentum of pursuit rather than any consciously adopted plan that had caused Rhoda to dismiss her taxi and follow Claire Cleveland into the Worcester Hotel. She wasn't, of course, more than a minute or two behind her and what she expected, as far as she'd clearly expected anything, had been to see Claire at the desk inquiring for Mr. Forster.

The Worcester appeared to be a very rich hotel and the mere magnificence of the lobby confused her a little so that it cost her another minute to get her bearings. By that time, at any rate, Claire was nowhere to be seen. Very likely she hadn't had to ask at the desk but had ridden straight up in one of the elevators. Having lost contact with her quarry, Rhoda sat down in one of the massive armchairs in the lobby to think things out a little. She could think competently enough when she was reduced to it but it was always the next best thing with her.

What ground had she for assuming that Claire had come here to see Forster? Well, it was quite reasonable when you considered it. Whatever she'd been told over the telephone while she'd had Rhoda locked up in the bathroom, had evidently been a blow to her; a blow, judging from her anger, dealt by the hand of an enemy. Out of the whole tissue of lies she'd told at lunch the one emergent truth had been the genuineness of her hatred of Forster and her belief that he hated her.

Out at her flat she'd been expecting Max's arrival with the trunk. The telephone message which had convulsed her with fury had come instead. What was more likely than that she'd learned that Max's uncle had somehow forestalled them, perhaps by nipping in and carrying off the trunk himself?

He might be, Rhoda perceived, just as unpleasant a person as Claire had painted him, or he might be perfectly benevolent, a potential friend. The advertisement in the paper, that Rhoda would learn something to her advantage by applying to him, might be true. He couldn't be dangerous—not physically dangerous—if he couldn't even walk without the aid of two canes.

And if he was the man who had brought her and

Babe down-town this morning, as she didn't doubt he was, he now knew where she worked if not where she lived; and this meant she couldn't avoid him unless she moved out of the studio and got a new job. If she was going to see him, what better strategic opportunity could she have for the visit than while Claire was there quarreling with him? It was Napoleonic, almost.

She was aware that Martin wouldn't have argued it out that way. Martin would have urged that the place to talk with an, at best, doubtful character like this, would have been on her own ground, not his, and in the presence of some trustworthy friend of her own. And yet it was the thought of Martin that brought her to her feet and started her across the lobby toward the desk to ask if Mr. C. J. Forster lived there. She wanted some small success to confront Martin with, to compensate for his having been so maddeningly right in his predictions about her lunch with Claire. She needn't actually go up to Mr. Forster's apartment unless she wanted to. An inquiry at the desk wouldn't commit her to anything.

But, in the strangest way, it did.

The clerk didn't directly answer her question, whether Mr. C. J. Forster lived there or not. He

asked for her name instead. But the moment she gave it (as Rhoda White) his manner became alert and deferential.

"Oh, yes, Miss White," he said, and nodded to a bell-boy.

His manner so strongly suggested that he knew all about her and had been eagerly awaiting her arrival, both manifest impossibilities, that she felt like backing away and saying it was all a mistake. She was faintly amused and faintly frightened, but more than either she was curious to follow the adventure through and see what happened. The clerk had probably mixed her up with some one else. Anyhow, Mr. Forster must be a pretty important person in this hotel to evoke a zeal like that, even though it was mistaken. There must be *some* mistake about it.

The bell-boy, on getting instructions, conducted her over to the elevators and spoke to the captain. "For Mr. Forster," he said. Whereupon the captain himself conducted her not to the car that was waiting with two or three passengers in it for the rest of its load, but to an empty car. "Right up," he said to the elevator boy, "all the way." The bell-boy followed her in and the car ran all the way to the twenty-fourth floor, regardless of signals.

In the mixture of Rhoda's emotions the element of fear gained a little at the expense of amusement. She began to feel that she'd started something she might not be able to stop.

The twenty-fourth floor appeared to be the topmost. There were red "Down" lights only over all the elevator doors. It didn't appear to be a regular hotel floor either, at least not the whole of it, for the broad corridor was cut off by a transverse partition of oak and ground glass, as in an office building. On a glazed door in the middle of it was painted the name "C. J. Forster," but it wasn't to this door that the bell-boy conducted her.

"No, that's just the office," he said as she made a move in that direction. He went over and pressed the bell button beside a solid door which had no legend nor numerals whatever upon its panel. There was no immediate response.

"Where are you taking me?" Rhoda asked, hiding her nervousness as well as she could.

He seemed surprised at the question. "Mr. Forster doesn't come down to his office much," he said. "He's got a regular house up on the roof of the hotel. This little private elevator takes you up to it. It'll be down in a minute."

"Heavens!" Rhoda exclaimed. "Does he own the hotel?"

"And how!" said the boy.

He had become human now that he was no longer under the eye of any of his fellow employees, and Rhoda's momentary wave of fear receded.

"What's his house like?" she asked.

"Gosh," said the boy, "I don't know! I've never seen it." There was a faint creak behind the door and the boy again became an automaton.

The door opened upon a small private elevator with a big man in it. He was dressed not in the hotel livery but in a blue serge suit with a double-breasted coat. Rhoda stared. Where had she seen him before?

"Miss White," the bell-boy said.

"It's all right, Miss," the man said, for she'd involuntarily backed away at the sight of him. "Mr. Forster's expecting you."

Reluctantly, beginning now to tremble a little, she stepped into the elevator, denouncing to herself as she did so the impulse to exclaim that it was all a mistake, and to run. There wasn't anywhere to run to, for one thing. But she might have tried it anyhow if she'd remembered two seconds sooner who the man in blue serge was. He was the man who'd come to their

studio last night pretending to be a name-taker for the new city directory.

His manner remained perfectly civil as he led her out of the elevator and ushered her across a broad hall into a room, where he asked her if she would mind waiting a few minutes. Mr. Forster, he said, would see her directly. If the jaws of some trap were closing upon her she wasn't meant to be aware of them yet.

He closed after him as he went out the door they had come in by and she noted in her first panicky glance about the room that its other doors were closed also. There was a complete silence. She couldn't even hear the receding footsteps of the man after he'd shut the door.

She checked her impulse to flight with the reflection that it wouldn't do any good. If they wanted her they had her. How had it happened? How could they have known she'd come here when she had only turned into the hotel on the spur of the moment, in pursuit of Claire. She'd never even heard of C. J. Forster until Martin had told her about him last night. Her notion that the hotel clerk and all the rest of them had mistaken her for some one else would no longer serve as an explanation. The man in the blue serge suit must have recognized her, though his stiff face had not

betrayed the fact. It had been as Mr. Forster's agent that he had come to the studio last night to see whether she lived there. It had been on the strength of his report that Mr. Forster himself in his limousine had followed her and Babe this morning, offered them the lift Babe had so gladly accepted, and incidentally, found out where they worked. That seemed to hang together.

But whose tip had brought the man in the blue serge suit—detective, body-guard, valet, whichever he was, or perhaps a combination of all three—to the studio last night? Who besides Babe and Martin knew that the Rhoda McFarland Mr. Forster was advertising for lived there? Why, Claire had guessed who she was the night before that, and Max Lewis had discovered where she lived!

Had Max changed sides and gone over to his uncle? Had he stolen the trunk for his uncle and not for Claire? Was that the purport of the message Claire had received over the telephone? Were they all here now in one of those other rooms fighting over it?

She thought now of the thing she ought to have done before she went over to the desk to inquire for Mr. Forster. She ought to have telephoned to Martin and told him what she meant to do. With things as

they were between them since she'd been so beastly to him this morning, he'd probably washed his hands of her. If she'd got him on the phone she could have begun by telling him she was sorry. Even if she'd failed to find him at his desk, which was likely enough at this time in the afternoon, she could have left a message that she was at the Worcester Hotel and was going up to see Mr. Forster. And then, if in a reasonable time she'd failed to appear, he'd have led a rescue party. Well, it was too late for that now.

Or was it? There was probably a telephone right here in this room. But her hasty look about the apartment in search of it was fruitless. If there was one, it was hidden.

It was a queer sort of room, now she began taking it in: large, well proportioned, with a high barrel-vaulted ceiling, beautifully but rather heterogeneously furnished, partly as a drawing-room and partly as an office, since there was an enormous flat-topped desk, bare except for a bronze bust of Napoleon, in the middle of it. The entire floor was covered by one wonderful carpet that must have been especially woven for it. But what was it that made the place seem so queer? Why, there wasn't a window in the whole room!

The early twilight of a cloudy autumn afternoon

was already closing in, which might be why she hadn't noticed the absence of daylight in the room when she first came in. But was that the only reason? Probably not. There were pictures all around the walls, big, handsome oil paintings regularly spaced, all of them heavily framed and in shadow boxes with a special light over each, and they broke up the walls more or less as windows would. Some of the pictures were modern and some looked like old masters, whether genuine or not of course she couldn't tell. She could hardly imagine the same person liking them all. They looked as if they had been bought as investments.

The biggest of them all was above the great fireplace down at the end of the room. It was a landscape which Rhoda decided looked as if it had been painted from stage scenery rather than from nature itself, and it remained singularly dull and flat and uninteresting despite the prominence of its place and the brilliancy of the light that shone down upon it from just above the frame. The thing that held Rhoda's interest down at that end of the room was the fire that was blazing in the grate just before it. It was an unusually picturesque fire, with its leaping flames, and Rhoda stared at it a full half-minute wondering why she didn't hear it purr or crackle before she discovered that it wasn't

a fire at all. It was a highly ingenious electrical counterfeit, and must have cost a lot of money. No doubt Mr. Forster was correspondingly proud of it, though why, she wondered, was the chair that was obviously his placed on the wrong side of his desk, not where he could watch the leaping artificial flames, but with his back to them? Perhaps he'd got used to them and liked now to watch the wondering admiration in the faces of his successive visitors.

The artlessness of this bit of vulgarity amused her so much that she forgot to be frightened. The consequence was that she was smiling a little and almost her normal confident self when the door opened and Mr. Forster, supported by one of his canes and on the arm of the man in the blue serge suit, came into the room.

He paused just inside the door for a sharp, faintly puzzled look at her, as if he'd expected his appearance to produce some sensation that hadn't come off. Then he gave away what had been in his mind by saying, "We've already met to-day, you see."

"Yes," she answered, a little vaguely, "I know."

The puzzle that had again come up sharply in her own mind was why he should have taken her being here for granted. She couldn't talk to him, though,

during his slow painful progress across the room toward the big chair she'd correctly assumed was his. After he was seated he indicated the chair at the end of the desk, facing the imitation fire, as the one he wanted her to take. Then he said to his attendant, "That's all; you needn't wait. I shan't want you until I ring."

Was it pure imagination on her part, or had he given that order as if he meant something special by it?

The man's going was, as before, noiseless, and since Forster didn't immediately speak to her after he'd gone out it seemed almost as if he were waiting for something. The intensity of the silence again became noticeable and frightened her a little. He may have observed this, for what he finally said was, in a low husky voice, "I'm very sensitive to sound—don't like sudden noises or loud voices. I've got this room practically sound-proof. That's a felt ceiling up there, though you wouldn't know it. What do you think of my open fire?"

It amused her that he should come to it so directly, and she smiled as she said, "It's very clever."

"You got on to it, did you? You're a smart girl. It's fooled lots of people for longer than you've been in here. I like the looks of an open fire. It makes a

room seem homelike, but they're too noisy and too dirty. Not scientific either. This room is always perfectly warmed without it. Been admiring my pictures?"

"Yes," she said politely. "I think they're wonderful." But she felt that was a little inadequate so she took a chance and added, "And they must have cost a perfect fortune."

It had been the right note. He seemed genuinely pleased.

"You've got a real eye," he said approvingly. "That's what they did. That's a Rubens over there and the one next to it is a Titian. Absolutely genuine, both of them. Yes, it's a nice room. I spend most of my time in here, though I've got plenty more. Fourteen in all, in this apartment. Any time I want to entertain company I'm equipped to do it. Without sending them down-stairs into the hotel, either.

"It's perfectly wonderful," she said again, rather feebly. She felt it was better tactics to follow his lead, but she couldn't keep this up indefinitely.

Luckily the next thing he said was on a new tack.

"I suppose you've been wondering why I sent for you."

So he'd sent for her, had he? Most likely he'd left

a message of some sort at the paper which she'd have received if she'd gone back to work this afternoon. That pretty well disposed of her misgiving that she'd been lured into a trap. If he'd contemplated anything ugly or dangerous, like detaining her here against her will, he wouldn't openly have summoned her to his apartment. He thought she'd come in answer to his summons. Well, it wouldn't do any harm for the present to let him go on thinking so. The less she said for a while the more she'd learn. So her answer was merely a hesitating admission that she had wondered what he'd wanted of her.

He seemed a little put out by the way she phrased it. "I don't want anything of you at all," he assured her earnestly. "The only thing I want is to do something for you. This is going to be the best thing you ever did, coming to see me."

Her intention was to look like a simple-minded child of three hearing about Santa Claus, but it was clear she wasn't much of an actress, for he added, instantly, "You look as if you don't quite believe that. Well, I don't wonder, after all the hard times you must have had. But think, now. Didn't your father ever tell you anything about me?"

That *was* the connection, then. A part, at least, of

what Claire had been telling her at lunch was true. The question strung her mind to the highest pitch of alertness. She answered it with cautious vagueness. "I don't know. He may have."

"Well, of course," he said, "you were a pretty small girl when I hired him. Let's see, how old were you?—When you left California, I mean."

"Twelve," she told him.

"It was four years your father worked for me, and it's two since he died: six years. So you're eighteen now. Well! Well! A grown up young lady!—And he never told you anything about me at all?"

"No," she admitted, "I don't think he did."

"I knew about you, though," he said. "I even saw you a few times out walking with him in the park, and so on. I remember your red hair. That's how I recognized you this morning. And I'm glad I found you at last. There have been times when I was about ready to give it up."

"Why," she asked, "were you so anxious to find me?"

He seemed to regard the question as unnecessary, if not almost brutal. "Why?" he echoed. "Of course I wanted to find you. I'd never have lost you if I hadn't been sick myself when your father died. I was a

mighty good friend to your father. You might say I was the only one he had. He was a fine man. Smart, too, there's no denying that. Only not practical, and smartness don't get you anywhere without that.

"Still and all I didn't complain. He'd have been working for me right now if he'd lived. So when I began to get better from my sickness and found out that his only child had gone off nobody knew where, I felt bad about it and began looking for her. And now I have found you it's a load off my mind, you might say.

"And what I want to tell you is that you've found a friend, that's the long and the short of it. I'm an old man, old enough to be your grandfather, and I'm still an old bachelor without chick or child of my own. So I want you should feel you can come to me with any of your troubles; ask me for anything you want—within reason, that is.

"I can give you a better job than you've got down there with the newspaper, where you'd get more money and wouldn't have to work so hard. You could come here and do secretary work for me. Settle down and live right here, too. I mean that. You can go home and pack your trunks and move in here this afternoon. The fact is, it would suit me if you did that very thing."

Rhoda had to admit to herself that this was, in-

trinsically, a good plausible explanation of his search for her. She had, as it proceeded, found herself wondering why she wasn't believing a word of it. There was nothing about it she could disprove; there was only one thing she could confidently label as false—and this wasn't logically very important. He'd spoken of having hired her father—by implication for some permanent and not very important job, since his impracticality would always keep him from getting anywhere. Still, the generous Mr. Forster had never complained, and her father would still have been working for him if he had lived.

She had known nothing of the nature of her father's actual labors during those four years but she did remember the passion that had inspired them and the hope of sudden great fortune that had still been burning in him the very night he died. He'd begged the doctor for enough of the drug to keep him going a few hours more. Those memories couldn't be reconciled with the sort of job this man was talking about. Why was he trying to make it look like that? Why couldn't he have said, "I financed some experiments that your father expected great things from, but they never came to anything." That would make a better story. It would make him look more generous—and he

was trying to look generous. It would saddle her with an obligation, at least to gratitude.

Well then, why had he gone out of his way to lie about it? That was the question in her mind when he wound up his speech, with the suggestion that she pack up her trunks and move in to this palatial apartment of his this very afternoon—and the word trunk struck a spark from it.

"It may be," Claire had said at lunch, in discussing Forster's reason for advertising for her, "that he thinks you've got some paper of your father's that he wants," but she'd added that she didn't personally believe it was that. Was the addition made in simple instinctive thrift in the matter of truth telling or in furtherance of her own interests? Had Rhoda's father been as near success the night he died as he believed he was? That would account for Forster's lying about his job, for his belittling it all he could.

There was a paper, then, and Forster knew it and had been trying for nobody knew how long to get it, dangling his bait in the classified columns of the newspapers, meaning when he had found her to play the benevolent grandfatherly friend and steal it from her without ever letting her suspect her loss. But Claire knew about it too, and Claire had found her first.

Claire's scheme for getting the paper had failed, probably through the treachery of her confederate, Max.

But Forster hadn't got it either, or he wouldn't be sitting here now telling her how kind he meant to be to her, urging her to go home and pack her trunks and come and make her home with him.

She looked up at him now and found him staring at her with a look of consternation.

"What's got into you?" he asked. "What are you thinking about, all of a sudden? What makes you look like that?"

"I was thinking," she said, "that even if I did come here to live I couldn't bring all my trunks. You see, the little hat trunk that had all my father's papers in it was stolen while I was out at lunch to-day."

CHAPTER X

SOME LIGHT AND MORE DARKNESS

SHE had expected that statement to startle him, but she'd nowhere near guessed what the force of the explosion would be. The utter disintegration of panic that his whole appearance betrayed would have been ludicrous if it had not been revolting. He turned a sudden look over his shoulder as if he'd expected to see some accomplice of hers standing there. Then, turning back, he snarled, "Take your hands out of your pockets!" They had been in her pockets as they usually were when she had on this sports coat, and he had to repeat, "Take them out!" before she realized what he was afraid of.

She folded them on the edge of his desk as she said, "I haven't any revolver and I didn't come up to shoot you, Mr. Forster."

His face had gone a sickly shiny yellow, but now the color began to come back into it. A door had opened and the man in the blue serge suit was in the room. "Yes, sir?" he said interrogatively.

"I didn't ring, Conley," Forster told him without looking around. "Understand now, I shan't want you until I ring."

It was precisely the same phrase, Rhoda noted, that he'd used in dismissing the man the other time. It was no doubt a code order to station himself at some listening post where he could hear everything they said. Most likely it was because there was such a listening post that Forster had gone out of his way to tell her the room was sound proof. Let him listen! She didn't care.

"You shouldn't have shouted at me like that," Forster went on querulously when the door had closed behind his attendant. "I told you I was sensitive to sudden sounds."

She might have raised her voice a little above normal conversational pitch, but she knew that wasn't what had frightened him. However, she pretended to accept the explanation, and said she was sorry.

"What was it you were saying?" he asked. "That some trunk of yours had been stolen?"

"Yes," she said, "my hat trunk, while I was out at lunch. At least I think that's when it was. When I went back to the studio after lunch, about two o'clock, I found it gone."

"Went home after lunch, did you?" he asked, with a sharp look at her. "What kind of hours do you keep on your job?"

"I had this afternoon off," she told him. "I didn't go back to the paper at all."

"Well, then," he demanded, "how did you get my message that you were to come up here and see me?"

She hadn't foreseen the question, and her instinctively truthfuly answer was, "I didn't."

"Well," he persisted, "how did you know who I was or where I lived? What did you come here for?"

She could see that he was getting frightened again. She was no longer afraid of him. He'd revealed himself to her so far as a contemptible compound of vulgarity, meanness and cowardice. Nevertheless, since she was satisfied it wasn't he who had stolen her trunk, she thought he might be useful as an ally in getting it back. So she made her answer as reassuring and conciliatory as she could.

She smiled at him as she said, "It's rather complicated. I came here without having planned to and I was surprised when I found you were expecting me. I didn't know anything about you until last night. Even then I hadn't decided to answer the advertisement. I didn't connect you with my father, you

see, nor know that you'd been his friend. Well, last night I got a letter from a woman I'd never heard of before, asking me to lunch with her to-day. She said she'd known my father well and had something very important to talk to me about. I went to lunch with her to find out what it was. What she seemed interested in was my father's papers, whether he'd left any and whether I had destroyed them. I told her I hadn't: I'd kept them all together in a trunk. She said she'd given him a letter to keep for her and now she wanted it back. She suggested that I take her home with me—to my room, you know—and let her help me find it. I told her that that wasn't necessary, but that I'd find it for her if I could. When I said that, she excused herself from the lunch table to go out and telephone. When she came back she kept talking and ordering more food so that I couldn't get away. When I finally got away and went home, I found that the trunk with my father's papers in it was gone."

His little gimlet eyes had been boring right into her all the while she talked. Now, at her first pause, he barked out, "Who was this woman?"

"She told me," Rhoda answered, "that her name was Claire Cleveland."

A sudden suffusion of blood in his face turned it

purple. He beat feebly but furiously upon his desk with a loosely clenched hand. "So you've joined up with that blackmailing bitch, have you?" he said.

"I haven't joined up with her at all," Rhoda retorted. "I've just been telling you I think she stole my trunk."

"What if she did?" he snarled at her. "What's that got to do with me?"

"Of course I don't know," Rhoda admitted, "that it has anything to do with you. But she talked to me about you quite a lot at lunch—after she'd come back from the telephone, that is. She said she'd seen your advertisement for me in the newspaper."

He pounced upon her here with a question. "My advertisement? How did she know it was mine? It wasn't signed. Come to that, how did you know yourself?"

"A friend of mine on the paper found out for me," Rhoda said. "But I was wrong in saying that Claire knew. She said she thought it probably was you."

"Call her Claire, do you," he commented, "when you never saw her before to-day?"

This slip had rattled Rhoda. She'd been aware of it as it left her tongue. "She asked me to call her that," she explained, "and I did, though I hated to

because I hated her. And the real reason I came to see you was because she urged me so strongly not to. I thought she must have some reason of her own for not wanting me to come."

It was plain that he didn't think much of this explanation. "What reasons did she give," he demanded, "why you shouldn't answer the ad—supposing it was mine?"

"She said," Rhoda told him steadily, "that you'd been the cause of all her trouble. She said you were a terrible person that liked to get young girls."

He broke in with an ugly laugh. "And on the strength of that you thought you'd come."

Rhoda felt her face burning and didn't know whether her voice would obey her or not, but she answered the sneer as if it had been a real question. "I thought she was lying. I didn't think you were like that. I'd seen you this morning when you took us down to work in your car."

"How did you know that was me?"

"She said you walked with two canes and I'd seen them in the corner of the limousine."

He dismissed that explanation with a mere snort of contempt. "Well, go on," he commanded. "What else did she tell you?"

"She told me that you'd been in business, in a way, with my father, and that you'd played some sort of trick on him. She spoke as if she knew all about it but she didn't tell me what it was. At least . . ." She broke off there as a result of a sudden confusion of memory.

Forster noted it at once. "What's the matter?" he asked sardonically. "Just found something about your story that doesn't fit?"

"Hers didn't very well," Rhoda explained. "Perhaps there were two tricks. She spoke of one as if she really knew all about it. But the only one she told me anything about was one she only guessed you had anything to do with. She said it was her personal opinion that you were responsible for my father's trouble out in California."

"California!" He fairly yelped the word at her.

She glanced toward the door expecting to see Conley appear again, but he didn't. And, indeed, after this explosion Forster seemed more angry than frightened.

"Now I know you're lying," he said when he'd got his breath. "This Cleveland woman worked in my office. For a while she was my private secretary. Then I found out what sort she was and fired her.

She may have known that McFarland was working for me but I don't believe it. I don't believe she ever saw him in her life. Anyhow, she didn't know he came from California. She didn't know that until you told her about it while you were working up this plan between you to blackmail me. Come across now! Tell me the whole story, and I'll let you go. But if I catch you in any more lies you'll spend the night in jail.—And to begin with," he wound up after a long stare into her face, "who are you, anyway?"

Bewildered now by the suddenness of his attack she could only echo in amazement, "Who *am* I?"

"Yes. And for that matter," he went on, "how old are you? Eighteen, you say. Sure you weren't eighteen six years ago? Thought you'd cooked up something pretty good, did you, when you got together and swapped stories with a discharged employee of mine, faked up the red hair, and came around here pretending to be Rhoda McFarland."

"I *am* Rhoda McFarland," she told him furiously. "I don't know who you think I am. I don't know what you're talking about."

"I don't mind telling you what I'm talking about. I'm talking about what happened to Professor McFarland six years ago, when he got on a train here in

Chicago to go back to the coast. He'd been east to read a paper before the Oil Chemists' institute, and he found a young girl on the train across the aisle from him crying because she'd had her pocketbook stolen after she'd got on the train.

"He was sorry for her and paid her fare, Pullman and all, so they wouldn't put her off the train. According to his story that was all he did. And she promised him her friends would pay him back the money as soon as she got to the coast. But what she did was to make a complaint before the District Attorney out there that he'd taken advantage of her.

"He claimed it was a frame-up, and when it went to trial the jury acquitted him, although he couldn't show any reason why any one should want to frame him that way and no one else could either. And the scandal of the trial cost him his job at the university.

"So he came back here and told me his story, and I believed him and gave him a job. He felt disgraced about it. He was like a man hiding out from the police; didn't want anybody to know who he was or what he was doing. Well, I could see how he felt so I never told a soul anything about it. I even paid him his wages in cash every week.

"Claire Cleveland couldn't have found out anything

about him, even if she'd tried to. He never came near my office nor where I lived. He worked at a place I fixed up for him, and I used to go around there once a week to see how he was getting on and to pay him his money. I'm dead sure he never told his daughter anything about that California mess. She was nothing but a kid. He'd have kept it from her if he'd been telling everybody else in sight.

"So when you said that Claire Cleveland was talking to you about what happened to McFarland out in California, I'd have known you were lying even if you hadn't given yourself away by other things. And if you want to know who I think you really are, I don't mind telling you that, either. I believe your're the one person alive to-day who really knows whether Walter McFarland was telling the truth or not."

Until he'd finished she hadn't seen what he was driving at. And when she did she could do nothing but stare at him, confounded by the mere monstrousness of his mistake. To complete her discomfiture she found she was beginning to cry. Silly unwanted tears were welling up in her eyes, anyhow, and blurring her sight of him.

"You can cry, can you? Well, it worked with him but it won't with me. So you may as well . . ."

He broke off there and what had interrupted him both made her blink away her tears and checked their coming. In any other mood it would have made her laugh. A sort of little trap-door in the front of Napoleon had silently fallen forward and revealed, as he reached toward it, a telephone instrument inside. It was the same sort of silly expensive nonsense as the artificial fire. He'd probably have explained it, if he'd been in the mood for explaining, by saying that he didn't want to be startled by the sudden jangle of the telephone bell.

He seemed rather startled, though, by the message he was getting. "What's that?" he barked. "Who does he say he is?" He shot a sharp look at her when he got the answer to the question, as though he suspected her of having had something to do with that telephone call. "All right," he said, after listening for a minute. "I'll see him, but not in here. Have him shown up to the library. I'll see him there. And find DeGraw and tell him I want him."

He put the telephone back in Napoleon's swelling bosom and clicked the little trap-door shut upon it. Then he pressed an electric button on his desk.

"I'm going to leave you here for a while," he said to Rhoda, "to think things over, and you'd better think

straight, if you can. I'm going to *get* this Cleveland woman. I've got her now, as far as that goes. But I've got nothing personal against you. And if you can make up your mind, by the time I come back, to come through clean and tell me the whole conspiracy, I'll let you go. Meanwhile you can stay here and be as comfortable as you can. It won't do you any good to try to get away or to make a row. You could holler your head off in here and nobody would pay any attention to you. Not even hear you, for that matter."

His ring had been answered while he was speaking, not by Conley, but by a sort of overgrown page in livery. He now helped the old man to his feet and conducted him to the door Rhoda had come in by.

Rhoda sank back in her chair too limp to obey her rather weak impulse to try to dart out of that room before they should have time to lock her up in it.

What possessed her mind was the story Forster had been telling her about the girl he'd preposterously taken her to be. Did he really believe that? Was there a scrap of genuine doubt in his mind that she was Walter McFarland's daughter? Wasn't the whole thing a bluff to put her on the defensive and frighten her into doing, eventually, whatever it was that he wanted her to do? It would have been a rather satisfactory ex-

planation if she could whole-heartedly have adopted it, if for no other reason than that it brought him out in a clearer, less ambiguous light.

But she found she couldn't adopt it. He wasn't a much better actor than she was. His manner while he had been trying to convince her that he had been led by nothing but disinterested benevolence in trying to find her had been sleek and sly, utterly unconvincing. Three times during their talk she had startled him into explosions of uncontrolled fright or anger: when she had mentioned the theft of the hat trunk; again, when she had spoken Claire Cleveland's name; and, finally, when she had referred to what had happened to her father in California.

The first two times he had seemed more frightened than angry, like an animal starting back at a trap. But the last time he hadn't been frightened at all. Indeed his anger had seemed to carry with it a relief from his former fear, as if she'd given herself away, and he'd perceived at last that what he'd been frightened about wasn't true. And that must mean that he didn't believe it possible that Claire Cleveland could have known anything about the California episode.

She found herself accepting what he'd told her about that as the truth. Some of the other things he'd

told her she knew to be true. Her father had been paid every week regularly, through the whole four years they'd lived at the hotel, in cash. Forster wouldn't have known that unless he'd paid him himself, or it wasn't likely that he would. What he'd said about her father's feeling disgraced and having lived practically in hiding was confirmed, too, by innumerable memories of his having cautioned her not to talk to people, nor answer their questions, nor make friends with them. It was quite likely that Forster had guarded his secret, though perhaps for reasons he didn't avow, as carefully as he said he had.

But Claire Cleveland, somehow, had found the secret out. She'd spoken with perfect confidence of the laboratory on Erie Street where her father had worked. Had she really worked for him there—evenings, as she said she had? It was possible, but it didn't seem very likely. At any rate, it was flatly unbelievable that he would have confided to her at those times, as she said he had, the story of his California disaster. And yet it was clear that she knew about that. She'd spoken of it with easy unguarded familiarity. She'd spoken of the trial and the sensation that it created. There'd been hardly anything else in the papers at the time, she said—at least in the San Francisco papers.

Rhoda sat erect and held her breath. Why, why hadn't she caught that slip at the time? All it meant, all it could possibly mean, was that it had been in the San Francisco papers that Claire had read about it. She'd been in San Francisco then during the trial. She hadn't said so. She hadn't meant to give that away. She'd pretended that it was from Walter McFarland's own lips that she'd heard this story, long afterward, here in Chicago. Of course! Claire Cleveland was the girl on the train.

Strangely enough the first feeling which this conclusion brought her was one of immense relief, like waking up from a long nightmare. She had always been sure of her father's rectitude; sure that the storm of scandal that had broken over him had been undeserved. But now, having heard the story for the first time, she was sure of it in a new way. She could face it now. She could talk to Martin about it. She was possessed by a confident certainty that her father had been the object of a conspiracy and that she had sat at lunch to-day with one of the conspirators.

She recalled her first impression of Claire, her momentary belief that she couldn't be the woman because she looked rather nice, and young—not much over twenty. Six years ago she could have looked convinc-

ingly like an innocent young girl crying forlornly over the loss of her ticket and her money and the prospect that they'd put her off the train. She had something of that look left even now. Martin had described her as looking younger than her voice sounded. Why hadn't her voice given her away to Walter McFarland? Well, perhaps the silver plating hadn't begun to wear away six years ago.

Had she hated the job they'd given her to do? Had the abstracted kindliness which Rhoda remembered so well on the rather rare occasions when her childish troubles had evoked it, the absence of all suspicious or even self-protecting questions, the total failure of her arts to rouse him to take even a greedy look at her, wakened in her any pity or even the reluctance of a faint distaste. She'd gone ahead and done her deadly work of betrayal, anyhow, but not, Rhoda believed, without a sense of the fine quality of the man she ruined and of the infamy of the plot she had consented to.

She had said at lunch to-day that while a pretty girl could "get" almost any man there were a few men who were different and she "believed" that Walter McFarland was one of them. She had also stated her "belief" that he was innocent; that "they had put something over on him."

Of course it was hard to tell where the truth left off and where the lies began. Her professed hatred of Forster was true, though as yet specifically unaccounted for. She had tried to convince Rhoda, though with a suspicious insistence upon her own lack of knowledge, that Forster was the person primarily responsible for the plot against her father.

That felt like the truth though it obviously wasn't. Forster had stopped being frightened and had burst into a rage of pure relief when she had told him that Claire had said that. That had been what had finally convinced him that she herself had been lying all along. It had even led him really to believe—anyhow the belief had seemed real—that she herself had been the girl on the train. That disposed of the possibility that he could be the man who had compelled, or persuaded, or coldly hired, Claire.

And yet he couldn't be left out of the pattern altogether. He had advertised for Rhoda McFarland and no one but an idiot could doubt after seeing him and hearing him talk, that he had done so in the furtherance of some mean purpose of his own. Claire, who had once been his private secretary, and Max Lewis, who was his nephew, knew, or thought they knew, what that purpose was, and had tried to forestall him by

finding her first. It was her father's papers Claire had tried to get a chance to rummage through, and at her own mention to Forster of the theft of those papers he had started as if she had drawn a revolver on him.

There must be something among those papers that he wanted pretty badly; something that had nothing to do with the California episode, but with the work he had done here in Chicago. Was there, or did Forster believe there was, among her father's papers some precious secret formula? Was that what with his dying breath he'd tried to tell her about? And was that what Claire and Max had been trying to steal so that they could sell it to Forster on their own terms? Was the conspiracy to ruin her father at the university an entirely unrelated thing except for the coincidence of Claire's connection with it? That seemed rather unlikely, but it was the only way the story made sense.

For a long time, yet without any consciousness that it was long, as abstracted and relaxed as if she had been safe at home waiting for Babe to come back and help her get dinner, she sat brooding over her father's story; recalling lost memories; piecing the strange fabric together.

But at last, with a start, she sat erect. What should

she do when Forster came back to question her further? Stick to the truth, which she wouldn't be able to make him believe? If he were honestly convinced that she was an impostor and a confederate of the Cleveland woman, she was in for a pretty bad time when he came back. If only she'd thought of telephoning to Martin before coming up here.

Her thoughtful gaze came suddenly into focus upon the bust of Napoleon. If she could find the way to open that little trap door she might be able to telephone to Martin now. Where would he be? It was too late, wasn't it, to find him at the paper? A glance at her wrist-watch changed to an incredulous stare. It couldn't be half past six, could it? That disposed of any possibility of finding him at the paper. Babe would be at home, though, by now, and she might be able to get word to him. That was the thing to try, anyhow.

It must have been some sort of electrical connection that opened the little trap door. There must be a button somewhere within easy reach that Forster could press when he wanted to telephone. She went over and sat down in his chair and looked about. It wouldn't do to press the wrong button. Indeed it wouldn't do to make any mistakes. She mustn't feel in a hurry.

There was no likelihood of her being interrupted unless she made a noise. She studied Napoleon intently. He had several buttons but none of them looked as if they pushed in. And the only button in sight on the desk was the one Mr. Forster had pushed in summoning the overgrown page boy to help him out of his chair.

It was exasperating to be baffled by a small thing like this. She was guiltily restless, too, sitting in that chair. She couldn't help wondering whether some one mightn't silently have entered the room from one of those two doors behind her. She could almost feel the gaze of a pair of eyes boring into her back, and at last, half involuntarily, she started to turn and see. As she did so her knee came in contact with the inner face of one of the pedestals to the desk and the little trap door fell forward. She had found the telephone button by pure accident.

Heartened by this bit of good luck, she picked up the telephone and, speaking as softly as she could, asked for an outside line and gave the studio number. The luck held. Babe's voice answered almost instantly. She asked if Babe knew where Martin was, and gave a gasp of relief on being told that he was right there in the studio. But why was he so long about coming? Why didn't he hurry?

From where she sat in Forster's chair she faced the principal door, the one she had come in by. She was still waiting for Martin's voice to come over the phone when she saw this door being quietly pushed open. The man who came in wasn't Conley, as she'd expected it to be, but Max Lewis. His look of astonishment when he saw her sitting in his uncle's chair would have been ludicrous if it had not been followed so quickly by a glare of anger.

"You're here, are you?" he said huskily. He added, "Put up that phone!" and snatching the door shut behind him he bore furiously down upon her to enforce his command.

She didn't obey him. She clung to the instrument and tried to say, in the hope that Martin was near enough to hear, "I'm at Forster's, at the Worcester Hotel." But before her tight throat could utter the words, Max had got the telephone away from her, and one of his thick beefy hands was over her mouth, his thumb and forefinger pinching her nostrils together so that she couldn't breathe at all.

CHAPTER XI

THE OGRE

HE HELD her so until he had replaced the telephone in Napoleon's chest and shut the little trap door upon it. Then he released her, saying as he did so, "You can yell if you like but it won't do you any good, in this room." He was still standing over her so that she couldn't get up out of the heavy chair. "What I ought to do," he concluded, glowering down upon her, "is to wring your neck."

She loathed him. His bull-like bulk oppressed her and some perfumery that there was about him made her feel a little sick. That hand, that he had pressed over her mouth, had been washed with heavily scented soap. The least repulsive thing about him was the obviously genuine rage he was in. And yet, formidable as she perceived him to be, she wasn't really afraid of him.

It came to her that down inside he himself was frightened; bewildered, anyhow, like a bull with a lot

of darts in his shoulders, gazing about the ring not knowing exactly who his enemy was. They shut their eyes when they charged, she'd heard. If she could just keep out of his way. Anyhow, it was plain he didn't quite know what he wanted to do with her. If he'd really meant to resort to physical violence he'd have gone on with it while he still had hold of her, instead of letting her go. She scrubbed her lips vigorously with her handkerchief before she spoke.

"I wish you'd sit down where I can see you," she said, "and tell me why you think you ought to wring my neck. I haven't done you any harm that I know of."

He didn't sit down, nor did he answer her question, but at least, angrily and uncertainly, he walked away a few paces before he turned again to glare at her.

She repeated her question in a simpler form. "What harm do you think I've done you?"

"What did you come here for?" he asked.

"Unless to make trouble for me," she supposed he meant. She looked at him thoughtfully and decided to chance planting another dart in him. "You mean," she said, "you're afraid I've come to tell your uncle that I think you stole my three hundred dollars and my trunk."

His face turned crimson and he lowered his head. It needed all the resolution she had to keep sitting quietly in her chair, but she managed it.

He was almost inarticulate with fury, but finally he managed to stutter, "I don't know what you're talking about. Neither do you. But that's one thing you've done. You've talked too damned much already."

Again, after a moment's thought, she saw what he meant and planted another dart in him. "You've talked with Claire, then," she declared, "since I saw her this afternoon."

This time he was completely speechless. He was visibly trying to see how she had arrived at that, but his poor fogged mind wasn't equal to it.

"If you didn't take my trunk," she added, "I'm sorry I told her I thought you did."

"Never mind about that," he said. "What did you come here for?"

She decided to evade that. "Your uncle sent for me," she told him.

If she'd been a practised deceiver she'd have stopped there. Not being one, she felt that the explanation sounded rather bare and added to it, "I don't know how he found out where I lived? Did you tell him? Because of course you did find out from Babe."

She'd noted that this observation of hers didn't sting him at all. It seemed almost as if it had given him an idea. He came now and sat down in the chair that she had sat in during the talk with Forster.

"No," he said, "I didn't tell him, but I happen to know how he found out."

He didn't offer to tell how he knew, and Rhoda refrained from asking. She merely waited.

"I guess I'm beginning to catch on to some things too," he went on, still eying her intently. "She's quite some girl, that Babe Jennings. How long have you known her?"

"Quite a while," Rhoda told him.

"Got sort of an idea she's a friend of yours?"

"No," Rhoda answered, "I know she is."

He gave a short laugh. "Did you know," he asked, "that she left for New York this afternoon on the Pennsylvania Limited?"

She smiled as she shook her head.

"Well," he asserted, "I saw her off on that train, myself."

It was obvious, now, what he was getting at, but the lie was so childish that she almost laughed as she said, "That's very interesting."

"Don't you believe it?"

"No."

Her skepticism didn't seem to irritate him. He stared at her thoughtfully a few seconds and then said, "Well, maybe I've got you all wrong. I thought you and she were teamed up in this business. Now I've got a notion that she's burned you just like she did me. Only you don't know it yet."

"How did she burn you?" Rhoda asked.

"Never mind about that. That's my end of it. Say, what kind of a trunk was it you lost? Because she took a trunk with her. I helped her check it."

"What sort of trunk was it that you checked?" Rhoda asked him. It didn't seem possible that even he would be fool enough to fall into that trap.

He did give his answer a little uneasily. "Why, I didn't notice it especially," he said. "It was sort of a square leather trunk."

She sat for a while in puzzled silence, gazing by preference at Napoleon rather than at Max. How could he have hoped she would believe a story like that? Why hadn't he seemed more disappointed that she didn't believe it? Was it possible that he really thought Babe had taken a train to New York?

"When did all this happen?" she asked at last. "What time did the train leave?"

"Five-thirty, from the Union Station. I've practically just come from there."

"What did she do? Call you up and ask you to see her off?"

The question startled her a little as she asked it. It made her think of the anonymous telephone message that had come to Claire Cleveland just as Claire had locked her in the bathroom.

It didn't startle Max, for he answered readily enough, "No, I just happened to run across her there."

"So you helped her buy her ticket and check her trunk and then you saw her off on the train. And now you've heard my trunk has been stolen you think that must be the one you checked?"

"Well, it seems kind of queer, her going off to New York like that without letting you know anything about it. You said you'd lost some money, didn't you? She's got that too, if you ask me. She certainly talked as if she had plenty. Said she'd been saving up for this bust for two years. She told me she was taking her vacation late so that the big burg would be running full time when she got there."

Involuntarily Rhoda started at that. Babe had been talking about that sort of vacation ever since she and Rhoda had begun living together. She'd used that

very phrase. Max couldn't have made it up. He *had* met Babe at the station then and she had made him think she was going to New York.

Why? Why had she gone to the station? Why, for that matter, had Max gone there himself? Had he meant to go to New York on that train? With her three hundred dollars and her trunk?

Well, how about Claire? Where did she come in? Or didn't she come in? Had he ditched Claire, or tried to? Was that what the telephone message had been about? Never mind that now. Whatever Max had tried to do he'd failed. Rhoda remembered how he'd looked when he came into the room. At that moment he had attributed his failure to her as well as to Babe. He'd been wrong about her. But had he been right about Babe? Had Babe really outwitted him and upset his plan?

Max must have seen that he'd startled her and set her thinking. But he had, of course, totally misjudged the direction of her thoughts. "Beginning to believe me now, are you?" he said. "Well, it's about time."

"I wish you'd tell me," she said, looking at him in as childlike a manner as she could manage, "what the terrible thing was that Babe did to you."

"Never mind about that!" he growled at her.

"But I can't help minding about it," she persisted. "It must have been at the very last moment she did it to you or you wouldn't have been so nice to her—seeing her off on the train, and all."

"Get off it!" he shouted. "It's no business of yours. You've got enough to worry about with what she did to you."

"I don't think," she told him cheerfully, "that I've anything to worry about at all. I think she's got my trunk back. You see I was talking to her on the telephone just now, when you came in here."

This proved one dart too many and he came for her; not blindly, either. She perceived before he spoke that he knew what he meant to do with her. He seized her arm with a wrench that made her want to cry out, and jerked her to her feet.

"Get out of here!" he said. "I'll make it worth your while to talk to me some other time, if you get out now before my uncle finds you here."

For an instant she stared up at him blankly, the realization breaking over her that he didn't know she'd already seen his uncle; that he thought she was voluntarily waiting for him. "All right," she said, "I'll go. But you'll have to show me the way out."

He didn't altogether release her, but his grip on her

arm relaxed as he started leading her toward the door she had come in by. Half-way to it they were halted by Conley's voice. He had come in by one of the smaller doors flanking the fireplace at the other end of the room.

"Drop it, Max!" he ordered.

Max didn't let go her arm, but he stopped and turned, with a defiant scowl, upon the detective.

Conley came up to them briskly. "Let the girl alone," he continued. "She's no affair of yours. Mr. Forster wants her to wait here."

Now Max did let go her arm, but it wasn't in obedience to Conley's order. "Lay off it," he said. "You aren't in on this. This young lady's a friend of mine and now she's talked to me she doesn't want to see C. J."

Conley agreed with a grin, "I guess she doesn't. But she don't leave this room until the boss comes back."

Glancing up at Max, Rhoda could see that that word, "back" troubled him, though he hadn't yet made out the implication in it. "Look here," he shouted, "you'll lose your job if you keep butting in like this!"

"Who'll get it?" Conley inquired ironically. "You?"

Rhoda started for the door at that, and she kept on going, though he barked at her, "Come back here, you!"

She was aware that Max interposed to check Conley's rush for her. The last thing she heard before she closed the door after her was the thud of a heavy blow, and she inferred from the fact that she wasn't immediately pursued and dragged back, that the recipient of it must have been Conley.

She walked—it seemed safer somehow than breaking into a run—down the broad corridor and around the corner, retracing her way in, although it was a stairway she hoped to find rather than the elevator, since she knew she'd never have the nerve to press a button and stand waiting for it to come up. However, by almost unbelievable good luck, she found the elevator there waiting for her, with both its own door and the outer guard gate standing wide open.

There was no attendant there. It was one of those mysterious little elevators you were supposed to run yourself. She hadn't an idea how they worked, but she stepped inside, swiftly scrutinized the little row of push buttons, and pressed the one marked "Down." There was a faint, protesting buzz, but nothing happened. In less desperate haste she might have reflected that an automatic elevator which could descend its shaft while its guard gate stood open would be a veritable death-trap, but on the verge of panic as she was, she couldn't think at all.

Then she heard a door open somewhere and stepped back into the corridor, poised for flight but not knowing which way to flee. The door was one she could see, though it was a little way around the corner. The overgrown page was holding it open, if she could judge from the glimpse she got of a green sleeve and brass buttons. Was that room the library, and was Forster's visitor on the point of leaving at last? What if she stayed where she was and went down in the elevator when he did? They wouldn't dare try to detain her by force with the stranger looking on.

But just as she reached that decision, a big, booming voice swept over her and, even before she consciously recognized it or took any meaning from what it said, all but paralyzed her with childish terror.

". . . Very well. But I warn you, you are making a serious mistake. I shall find her in spite of you, and if necessary, in spite of herself. She is a minor and I am her guardian—in effect, at any rate. Her interests are in my hands and I shall protect them."

It was six years since she had heard those heavy menacing tones. They had last come to her ears through the thin walls of their California bungalow. Only that time her father had been there to tell the speaker to go to hell. It was her uncle, William Royce—the ogre!

She fled now, as a child would, running blindly down one corridor, up another, turning corners at random. There must be a stairway somewhere.

She was just getting over this panic and beginning to try to feel ashamed of it when it was renewed by the sound of heavy and, to her ears, ogre-ish footsteps coming briskly along the transverse corner which she was approaching. She was passing, at the instant, a door which stood ajar. In another two seconds the foosteps would have reached the corner and she'd be seen. Instinctively she pushed open the door and stepped into the room it gave upon.

The room was dark, but she perceived at once it wasn't empty, since a woman's silhouette was visible against one of the windows. The woman hadn't heard her come in since she neither spoke nor moved.

But the footsteps which had frightened Rhoda were now just outside the door and pausing there. The man was coming in too. She wasn't cornered yet, however, for another door communicating with the adjoining room stood open too, and she retreated through it just before the man switched on the light.

The next moment she heard Max Lewis demanding angrily, "What the devil are you doing here?" He hadn't seen her, though; he was speaking to the woman.

CHAPTER XII

TO THE RESCUE

BABE and Martin stood staring at each other across a dead telephone.

"She'll try again in a minute," he said, "—unless something's wrong."

"Well, don't send for the undertaker yet," Babe snapped at him. "What would be wrong? Give the kid a chance." But in the next breath she added, inconsequently, "What do you suppose made her voice sound so funny?"

"Sure it was hers, are you?" he shot at her.

"Oh, my God," cried Babe disgustedly, "don't I know Red's voice? Look here, have you really got anything on your mind, or are you just generally cuckoo—about her, I mean?"

"I've got that Cleveland woman on my mind," he answered, not bothering to stop to parry her thrust at him, "and a man named C. J. Forster, who wants to get hold of her pretty badly, and I don't know why.

He's been advertising for her and somehow or other has managed to find her."

Babe asked, rather tensely, how he knew.

"It was Forster," he told her, "who brought you two down to work this morning in his limousine. Where did he pick you up? Just as you were leaving the building here?"

She answered with a nod, but he noted that she looked rather dazed.

"Well," he demanded sharply, "what's on *your* mind?"

"I guess it's my fault, then, if anything's happened," she said, pretty humbly for Babe. "I know how he found her, all right. You see, I answered his ad myself. He telephoned one in, the morning after Max had brought me home. Max had asked me that night if her real name wasn't Rhoda McFarland. I took the ad over the phone and got Forster's name and address. I'd tried to get Red to answer it the night before but she wouldn't. It said 'something to her advantage' and I thought it probably was. So I called him up at lunch time at the Worcester and told him if he'd write her a letter, care of me, I'd forward it to her. I didn't see how that gave her away, but it must have, somehow. I suppose you'd like to beat me up for butting in like that."

He patted her shoulder instead. "It's no use worrying about that now," he said. "I'm glad you told me. It's between him and the Cleveland woman, then. They are fighting each other, that's one good thing. But one of them has got her, somehow. If that had been a plain broken connection she'd have called again. . . ."

The telephone bell interrupted him. Babe was nearer and caught up the instrument before he could get to it.

"Red!" she cried, "is that you?"

But it wasn't Rhoda. Babe was looking rather puzzled. "No," Martin heard her say. "She hasn't come back yet. We're expecting her. . . . This is her friend, Babe Jennings.—Say, who *is* this?"

Martin started over to take the telephone away from her, but she clung to it pressing the mouthpiece tight against her chest.

"Martin!" she cried excitedly, "I think it's the woman at the station—the Cleveland woman! Listen and see if she sounds like she did when you telephoned to her this afternoon."

He'd been motioning at her frantically to take the transmitter away. "She can hear every word you say when you hold it like that. Talk to her! Ask her where she is. Give me the receiver so I can hear what she says."

But all he was in time to hear was the click of disconnection. Claire had hung up on them.

"Well," Martin remarked as he himself hung up, "thanks to that chest trick of yours she knows how we framed her and Max this afternoon. But she hasn't got Rhoda or she wouldn't have called up here to ask for her. That makes the Worcester our best bet. I'm going there now and try to find her. You stick—tight, you understand—to that telephone so that you can answer the second she calls, if she does call again. I'll call up myself as soon as I get to the Worcester to find out if you've heard from her. So long, and don't go to sleep at the switch."

With that he snatched his hat and fled.

Fifteen minutes later, from a telephone booth in the lobby of the Worcester Hotel, he called the studio and asked Babe if she'd heard anything from Rhoda. She hadn't and she was on the point of mutiny. She wanted to go out and try to do something herself. When he'd dissuaded her from this she demanded to be told what he was going to do.

"I can't tell you over the phone," he said irritably. "I'll find her all right."

But he was feeling rather small and disingenuous as he hung up, for the fact was that he'd as yet formed

nothing that deserved to be called a plan. Rhoda needed help and she'd called to him for it—or tried to. Whatever her plight he believed Forster was responsible for it. So he meant to get at Forster and put the screws on him, though just what his resources were, in the way of screws applicable to the crippled old millionaire, he hadn't tried to reckon in detail.

It struck him now as he was on the point of leaving the booth that it might be better strategy to try to make his appointment for an interview over an outside line than by going to the hotel desk and asking for him. So he looked up Forster's number in the book, went back into the booth, and telephoned from there.

When a man's voice answered with a "Hello? Who is this?" he said that he was a reporter from *The News* and he wanted a personal interview with Mr. C. J. Forster. The rather surprising answer came back, "This is Mr. Forster speaking. What was it you wanted to speak to me about?"

Apart from the fact that you wouldn't have expected Forster to answer his own phone, there were two queer things about this. The rhythm of his talk wasn't right. The man wasn't speaking for himself. He was being prompted. This meant, of course, that he wasn't Forster but was impersonating him under

orders from some one else. The other strange thing was that his voice was one that Martin half recognized; felt, at least, that he ought to be able to recognize.

"I don't much want to talk about it over the telephone," Martin said, and then added casually, "—and I don't believe you do either."

Evidently they—whoever they were at the other end—had to go into conference over this remark, for it produced quite a silence. Finally the man who said he was Forster asked, "Who are you? What's your name?" On Martin's telling him he asked, "Where are you talking from? How long would it take you to get here?"

Over that question Martin paused a moment. But even so he answered without having quite thought out the consequences of his reply. "I think I can be at the Worcester within fifteen minutes," he said. There might be some strategic advantage in not letting them know that he was already in the hotel.

"If you've really got anything to say you can have your interview. But you'll have to tell me what it's about."

"It's about," said Martin, "the disappearance of Miss Rhoda McFarland. Do I get my interview?"

There was a long silence at that. Evidently they were having an argument about it.

"Nothing doing," the voice said at last. "I don't know that she's disappeared. I don't know that there's any such person."

"You don't want to say then why you've been advertising for her?"

The only answer he got to that question was a click which meant that the other receiver had been slammed down on the hook. So Martin hung up too and left the booth. Then, in order to be as inconspicuous as possible while he was deciding what to do next, he went and sat down in one of the big armchairs in the lobby.

The first thing to find out was the number of Forster's apartment, and of course, the obvious way would be to walk up to the desk and ask the clerk. But instinctively he shied at that. Forster was no ordinary transient guest here. A man as rich as he was, and permanently domiciled here, would have special defenses. You wouldn't be able to mention his name without starting something. The better way would be to drift into casual talk with somebody, a bell-hop or the girl who sold theater tickets, lead up to his question and ask it idly.

But it wasn't so easy as it looked, to frame that

question so it would sound casual. And if he failed, if his question roused suspicion, he'd be worse off than if he'd gone straight to the clerk in the first place. Damn it, why did he have to waste such a lot of time thinking?

He wasn't wasting time, as things turned out. His gaze was questing about the lobby, noting everything that everybody did, studying faces in the hope of finding one dull and friendly and unsuspicious enough to suit his purpose.

The man who had just come down in one of the elevators and now stood talking to the captain hadn't a face like that; very much the contrary, in fact, bleak and rocky as a chunk of the great American desert and he talked as if he were biting off the heads of finishing nails. In his double-breasted blue serge suit he looked like the house detective; too much like him to be him, probably, yet not the sort of person for Martin to go on staring at.

But Martin kept right on staring at him, regardless of the risk of catching his eye, until, in his own mind's eye, he had put a derby hat on his head and a brown overcoat on his back and a little leather note-book in his hand, and recognized him. He was the man who had come to the studio last night, getting names for the

new city directory. And this identification led on so quickly to another that it was like firing the second barrel of a shotgun. This was the man whose voice he had just now been trying to remember, the man on the telephone who had been pretending he was Forster.

He hadn't wasted any time getting down-stairs from Forster's apartment, and the action, following so closely on their telephone conversation, had to Martin the look of springing directly from it. It seemed a reasonable guess that the instructions Blue Serge was giving the captain were that any reporter or other inquisitive person asking questions about C. J. Forster or trying to get through to him was to be dealt with in a special manner.

Satisfied that the captain understood these instructions, whatever they were, Blue Serge left him and crossed the lobby to the desk. Here his business was not with the clerk but with the manager, who promptly came out of his little private office to talk with him. The manager was taking orders, too; not with any show of deference for the giver of them, but with an alertness which showed he recognized their importance.

Leaving the desk and a completely instructed manager behind it, the man in the blue serge suit now started across the lobby in a new direction; one that would

bring him, unless he veered off, uncomfortably close to Martin's chair. But before this embarrassment became acute he was diverted by one of the bell-boys who crossed his path. The boy seemed perfectly unaware of him, but Blue Serge, after a sharp look, turned on his heel and went back to the desk, summoned the manager again, brought him out into the lobby a little way, and nodded after the boy. Then he went off and disappeared into an elevator.

Martin sat still in his chair, not quite sure whether he was wasting time or whether things were really coming into focus. It was worth waiting another minute for, he decided. But he didn't have to wait. The last scene of the swift little pantomime followed immediately.

The manager, returning to his office, paused for a word to the bell captain. The bell captain spoke to the boy Blue Serge had pointed out. The boy, with a look of surprise, went into the manager's office to come out again a minute or two later flushed, indignant, and, withal, profoundly puzzled. Something had happened to him that he seemed utterly at a loss to account for; discipline, evidently, that he felt to be undeserved. He was coming along slowly in Martin's direction. That was luck.

There was a service door of some sort right beside his chair. That was luck, too, for it wasn't until the boy was in the act of passing his chair that the significance of the little play clicked into a pattern in the reporter's mind. That boy had seen something. He possessed, probably without suspecting it, some piece of damaging information, and they'd taken measures to prevent his giving that information away. Probably discharged him. Laid him off on a fictitious pretense.

If this was a good guess, Martin had something to tell him. He rose from his chair just when his doing so intercepted the boy's progress toward the door.

"I guess you're looking for me," he said.

The boy stopped in surprise and answered, "I'm not looking for anybody that I know of."

By that time Martin had moved away from his chair a little to where one of the great square pillars of the lobby cut off the view of the desk. The boy followed him uncertainly and asked, "What made you think I was looking for you?"

Martin took the plunge. "If they just laid you off," he said, "I think I can tell you why they did. Who's the hatchet-faced man in the blue serge suit who works for Forster? He pointed you out to the manager just now."

"Do you mean Conley? I haven't done anything to him. Say, who are you? How do you know they laid me off?"

"Conley's expecting a reporter around here in a few minutes, a reporter from *The Daily News* who's trying to find out about the disappearance of a girl. Conley knows more about it than he wants to tell, and he doesn't want the reporter to find out anything. He had you laid off because he thought you knew something about her."

"I don't know anything about any girl that's disappeared," protested the boy. "Say, who are you?"

"I'm the reporter Conley's expecting in about fifteen minutes. I got here before he was quite ready for me. Didn't you see a girl—a red-haired girl? Didn't you answer some questions of hers or take her somewhere? A girl with a sort of overcoat on and her hands in her pockets, and a little round blue cap without any visor?"

"Sure!" said the boy. "Forster was expecting her. I took her up to the top floor, to the private elevator. Conley ran her up from there. But I didn't get fresh with her. She was a nice kid. She wouldn't have put in any complaint about me."

"Of course she didn't. That was just his excuse for laying you off."

"The dirty pup!"

The boy's indignation was natural, but Martin hadn't time for it. "How do you know Forster expected her?" he asked.

"Because we ran her right up the minute she gave her name. Miss White, it was. She didn't know Forster owned the hotel and she seemed sort of scared when she found she was going up to that bungalow of his on the roof. Conley came down in the private elevator to take her up. And she kind of backed away when she saw him. But she got in and rode up with him just the same."

"What time was this?"

"I don't know," said the boy. "This afternoon some time. It was after three, because that's when I came on duty. Say, do you think they're keeping her up there?"

Martin nodded. He hadn't thought so until a moment ago. An ordinary hotel was no sort of place to keep an able-bodied courageous girl like Rhoda locked up in. But a bungalow on the roof offered opportunities.

"I'm going up to see if she's there, anyhow."

"How you going to get in?" the boy wanted to know. "The private elevator's locked up except when

they run it themselves. The only stair—except the service stair—comes down into Forster's office on the top floor. That's all locked up now. The service stair would take you right up into the pantry, and they'll be serving his dinner just about now. I don't believe you *can* get up if they don't want you to. They say the old man's scared to death some one will get him, sometime."

"How about the fire-escape?" Martin asked.

The boy's face lighted at this suggestion, but chiefly, Martin was disappointed to discover, in admiration of the reporter's nerve in contemplating it. "There's a fire-escape landing outside the window right at the end of the corridor on the top floor. And there's a steel ladder goes up from there that curves over the sort of stone railing at the edge of the main roof. I've never been up there, but one of the other boys got fired for doing it and he told me about it. The ladder don't exactly lead anywhere, because the bungalow don't come out to the edge of the building. It's set back, sort of, so there's a runway all around it. He said the windows were too high to see into, but maybe there's some way you can climb up. Or perhaps there's a door—though it would probably be locked. And that ladder must be pretty scary, climbing right up over the edge of nothing."

It may be confessed that it struck Martin that way. But all he said was that it looked like the best bet. He said it a little abstractedly, for reaching into his pocket for the tip the boy had so well earned, his fingers had closed upon the one limp dollar bill which was practically all that was left of the money he'd borrowed of Babe that afternoon. Penniless again! Well, it couldn't be helped.

"Say," said the boy as Martin held out the dollar, "are you doing all this just to get a piece for the paper?"

"No," Martin admitted, "the paper hasn't anything to do with this. She happens to be my girl."

"Gosh," said the boy, "I don't wonder you're going up to get her. I don't want the money. I'd like to help if I could."

So Martin shook hands with him instead and walked away, with the best air of unconcern he could assume, to the elevators.

The captain was busy trying to explain something to a dull guest.

"As far as you go," Martin said in response to an inquiring glance from the elevator boy. He hoped the phrase would conceal his ignorance of the actual number of the top floor, and it did. He perceived, though, that even the briefest hesitation on his part when he stepped out of the elevator at the top would be fatal to his plan.

The boy would ask him whose room he was looking for. He must choose in advance which way to turn. Very well, he'd turn to the right.

The car stopped, the boy opened the door, and Martin, in the unseeing manner of one who had been that way a dozen times before, walked out and made his precalculated turn.

It seemed at first that he had made a disastrously bad guess, for he found himself walking straight toward a transverse partition of glass and oak with a door in the middle of it marked "C. J. Forster." These were the offices the boy had told him about. But the door was ajar and there was a light inside. The elevator hadn't started down. The boy was certainly watching him. The only thing he could possibly do was to push open the door and walk in and see what happened after that.

Nothing happened. The first room he entered was empty. In the next room, also lighted, some one was moving about, and a lucky glance revealed to Martin who it was. Just inside the door stood a pail with a wringer attached to it. The scrub woman! He heard her coming heavily along toward the room he was in. At the same instant he heard the elevator boy start his car down. There was a cupboard in the corner, but he

was afraid to chance the creak of a hinge or the click of a latch. Three swift strides, carefully noiseless, took him to the wall and there he turned and waited. If she'd finished with this room and was simply coming to pick up her pail on the way out there was a good chance that she wouldn't see him.

It happened exactly like that. She shuffled across the room without turning her head, pushed out all the office lights at a switch beside the door, picked up her pail and went out, pulling the door shut after her. Martin drew a long breath and squeezed the sweat off his forehead with his hands. This was better luck than he could possibly have hoped for. And as usual, it frightened him a little; made him feel weak at the knees and hollow at the pit of the stomach.

A sense that he had no time to waste all but betrayed him into a mistake. The project that was on the rails of his mind was the one he'd come up in the elevator with, namely to get out the window at the end of the corridor on to the fire-escape, and he had followed the charwoman to the outer office door, which she had just closed, and had his hand on the knob when the thought of something else halted him. The helpful bell-boy who had remembered Rhoda had spoken of a stairway leading from the offices up into Forster's apartment. He

turned back at once and started through the suite of offices looking for it.

He had pictured, naturally enough, a more or less secret stair that would be pretty hard to find in the only slightly modified dark, behind a door in the paneling—that sort of thing. So when he saw it going boldly up from the second room he entered—evidently the stenographers' room, since there were four typewriter desks in it—his first thought was that this was too easy to be true. It wasn't as easy as it looked, however, for he found at the head of it a solid mahogany door, locked. The knob, when he tested it cautiously, didn't give at all. It wasn't like the door to Rhoda's studio with its flimsy cabinet work. No chance to work Max's knife trick here. It would take a competent burglar with a full set of tools to get in through that door, he thought despairingly.

He gained one advantage, though, from its solidity. There would be no harm in making a light and having a look at it. He got out his cigarette lighter and struck a light. There were two small pieces of electrical apparatus screwed to the wall above the door. One of them he recognized as an electric buzzer, and this, as he thought about it, seemed rather queer. Why wasn't it the other way around—the push button on this side and

the buzzer in Forster's apartment? Why should any one already in the apartment have to ring a door-bell to get into this public office? The door was locked against the office and into the apartment. Well then, it wasn't a door-bell.

Of course it wasn't. It was a signal, and since it sounded in the stenographers' room it seemed a reasonable inference that it was Forster's way of summoning a stenographer. But what good was it to buzz for her if she couldn't get through the door? Was the door left unlocked during office hours? No, a man as timid as Forster would want to feel better guarded against intrusion than that.

Martin held up the lighter again in an attempt to identify the other thing. He had a hunch that it would be worth looking into. He wasn't much of an electrician but he thought he ought to be equal to this.

He'd have to have something to stand on, though. The ledge of the door was two feet above his head. The top step wasn't wide enough to balance a chair on, but one of those big steel waste-paper baskets down in the stenographers' room would probably hold him up, and would just about give him the added height he needed. He brought one of them up and tried it. It was going to be a pretty precarious perch and the easy possibility

of his falling the whole length of the flight with the basket on top of him wasn't a pleasant one. Well, there was no use thinking about things like that. He'd got to have a look at the little sheet iron box that was screwed to the wall beside the buzzer.

He got out his pen-knife and dropped it, open, into the side pocket of his coat. It and the cigarette lighter were all he had by way of tools. Then, putting one foot on the rim of the basket he made a sort of spring and clutched the top of the door-frame. There he was and there the basket was. By unexpected good luck he'd avoided kicking it out from under him. He found he could hold himself with one hand, so he got out his cigarette lighter, lighted it and stood it on the ledge made by the door-frame.

He recognized the little sheet iron box now. It was a transformer such as he'd had when he was a small boy to run his electric train with. The one-hundred-and-ten-volt house current came into one side of it from a steel cable. A pair of low voltage wires went out the other side, connecting with the buzzer, but also going down through a hole in the door-frame. Well, he understood it now. The door was held by an electric catch such as they use for inner vestibule doors of apartment-houses. A button, probably on Forster's

desk, sounded the buzzer and at the same time released the catch. It meant that the stenographer had to get to the door before Forster took his finger off the button. The girls must hate that thing.

But what afforded Martin a broader grin than this was the thought of Forster's precious security being thus betrayed by the careless electrician who had put the transformer outside the locked door instead of in. All Martin had to do was to scrape the insulation off the wires and close the circuit and the door would be unlocked.

Wait a minute, though. He'd have to disconnect the buzzer first. He'd nearly forgotten that, and he turned cold for an instant at the narrowness of his escape. But two minutes' work with his pen knife—he had to break one of the blades in order to use it as a screw-driver—sufficed to accomplish his purpose. As he twisted the two bare ends of the wire into contact he heard a sharp click which announced that the door was unlocked. He sprang down from the basket, luckily once more without kicking it down the stairs, and opened the door. Luck was still with him. There was no one on the other side. The whole corridor was deserted.

For a moment after he'd closed the door he stood

still and listened. The sound his imagination was tuned to hear was of a young girl crying. The sound that did come faintly to his ears a moment or two later was not like that at all, and he recognized, the moment he heard it, that it was much the likelier thing to expect. When you stopped to remember what Rhoda was really like it was hard to imagine her crying even if they had pushed her into a closet and locked her up. This was a man's voice, momentarily raised in anger; not an old man's voice and not Conley's voice, yet again one that he somehow felt that he should remember. It guided him down the short transverse corridor he stood in and to the left down a longer one until it brought him to a halt outside a door. At that point the words became distinguishable and the voice identified itself at the same time.

"Oh, to hell with the three hundred dollars! All right, I took it. What are you going to do about it?"

The speaker was unmistakably Max Lewis, and it seemed equally beyond doubt to Martin that the person he was speaking to was Rhoda. With no warning knock he opened the door and stepped inside.

There was a good deal more light in here than in the corridor and he had to blink his eyes into focus before he could see very well. It was a girl Max was

talking to but she wasn't Rhoda. She was facing him and before Max could turn she rapped out, "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Martin would never forget that voice. It was Claire Cleveland.

He realized as she stared at him that she could have no idea who he was. She'd never even glanced at him before. All she could recognize him by was his voice. He didn't answer her question but turned to face Max.

Claire turned back to him in the same moment. "Have him wait outside," she ordered with a nod of her head toward Martin. "I'm not through with you."

"Stay right where you are," Max said to Martin. His face was blotchy with rage, yet there was a vicious sneering look of exultation about it too. "You've come to exactly the right place. I've got something for you." Then he wheeled on Claire. "You can get out and you needn't wait! You needn't come back, either. I'm through with you."

Any newspaper reporter has heard by the time he has finished his apprenticeship in the police courts plenty of bad language, but the stream of vilification which Claire in her fury now turned on Max had elements of novelty in it even for Martin.

Max made no attempt to answer her, but after perhaps a minute of it he went to the door and threw it wide open. "You'd better go quietly," he said. "If my uncle finds you're up here you'll be riding in a patrol wagon before you know it."

The opening of the door not only silenced her, it seemed somehow to harden her; to bring her to a decision. She stood still considering for a moment before she walked out. "All right," she said, "I think I'll just let him know I'm here and see what he does about it. You see, you really are too much of a fool."

Max was startled and it looked to Martin as if he meant to haul her back into the room after all, but he closed the door instead, with a shrug of bravado. He was ready to say something, but Martin spoke first.

"I've come up here to get Miss Rhoda White," he said. "It will save time and argument if you will take me to her."

"You're too late for her," Max answered. "She was here but she's gone away. I saw her out myself. Did you think that was what I had for you? Well, it isn't. It's something else. You'll save yourself the worst of it if you'll hand over what you and that other girl stole from me this afternoon. Don't stand there trying to look as if you didn't know what I meant. I

mean a railroad ticket and a trunk check. Come across now! Quick!"

Martin hadn't been trying to look as if he didn't know what Max meant. The vacant expression that the man referred to was due to a sudden realization of his folly in coming into Max's presence with the ticket and the receipt for Rhoda's trunk upon his person. There was no misunderstanding what Max meant to do.

Martin, who was no boxer, and indeed no physical match on any terms for his antagonist, tried to slip around him and get to the door. But Max was quicker than he was and he met his rush with a blow on the jaw that was like the kick of a mule. A crashing sound accompanied by a brilliant display of lights was the last thing Martin was conscious of for several minutes.

The next thing was a stream of cold air and wetness and a pair of light hands exploring beneath his unbuttoned coat. It was the last phenomenon only that provoked any response from him and even this was purely instinctive. He did not remember Rhoda's trunk check and ticket, that Max had said he meant to get, but all the same he tried to push the hands away. Even as he did so the fog lifted enough for him to

realize that they were a girl's hands and that they weren't picking his pockets.

The shaky voice that said, "It's all right. Lie still," sounded like Rhoda's and the face he giddily saw bending over him looked like Rhoda's. It couldn't be, could it? What would she be doing here? Where was this, anyhow? And why was his head drenched with water? It was Rhoda. She was getting clearer every minute—little blue béret and all.

"It really is you, isn't it?" he said.

She nodded and said, "Don't talk. Lie still."

He felt sure he mustn't lie still, though he wasn't yet collected enough to know what the urgency was. He said, "I'm all right," and tried to raise his head, but Rhoda held him down quite easily. There was a pillow under his head but he was lying flat on the floor and she was sitting, with her legs curled up under her, beside him.

As his vision cleared and things got less swimmy he saw that she'd been crying, and the shock of that discovery lifted the fog from his memory. This was the room where he'd encountered Max Lewis.

"What's he been doing to you?" he asked.

"Max? Nothing. He didn't know I was here. He thought I'd gone, just as he told you."

"But you must have been here to have heard him tell me so."

"I was in that room in the dark. Claire was in here waiting for him, but she didn't see me when I came in. I was running away, you see, and I heard him coming and dodged in here right into his sitting-room. And I slipped back into his bedroom just as he turned on the light in here. So I heard all he and Claire said while they were quarreling. But they were both so angry, each with the other, that I could hardly tell what it was about."

It struck him that he ought to know the framework of their quarrel; probably he would when he'd come to a little better. But what he was really aware of now was how nice it was to have Rhoda sitting so close beside him, with one precautionary hand on his chest to keep him from trying to get up. He must make an effort, though, to put things together, and presently, as the result of a moment of rather feeble thinking, he asked, "Why was he chasing you around the place if he thought you'd gone?"

"He wasn't," Rhoda said. "I wasn't running away from him. I'd had a long talk with Mr. Forster. I think I found out quite a lot from him, Martin. Then I talked with Max. All he wanted was to get

rid of me, and he thought he had. And then I heard my uncle talking to Mr. Forster and I simply bolted in a panic. It was perfectly silly, but I'm glad I did or I wouldn't have been here now."

Except for the extreme soreness of his jaw, the effect of Max's blow had pretty well passed. He could see all right, anyhow. He could see Rhoda's sweet young face with the traces of tears still upon it. There was nothing in what she'd told him to account for those tears. "What had they been doing to you?" he asked. "They must have done something or you wouldn't have cried."

She didn't answer his question at once; just sat as she was, looking down into his face. He saw her eyes getting brighter and her mouth twitch in a funny little grimace that tried to be a smile. Then, with a sob, she put her head down on his chest and clung to him. "I thought Max had killed you," she said.

The words had a surprising effect upon him. In the moment before they were spoken he had felt a throb of clear rapture tempered only by a breath-arresting incredulity that anything so like the last page of a fairy story could really have happened. But what she said went down horribly the wrong way. He saw himself from the view of a disinterested spectator,

ordering Max to turn Rhoda over to him, perceiving what Max's intentions toward him were, trying to dodge around him to the door and getting knocked cold by one punch. He felt completely ridiculous. "You aren't likely to be killed by getting a sock on the jaw," he said. "I wish you'd let me get up."

He wanted, terribly, to take her in his arms and kiss her, but he wanted to do it as her champion—not as a dying duck. She sat erect and stared at him, a perfect surge of bright color flooding her face, and then sprang to her feet. He couldn't spring to his but he clambered up as quickly as he could. Disconcertingly, he found himself swaying as he straightened up and he was aware that she started, and then instantly repressed, a movement to support him. Luckily this giddiness passed in a second or so, and he was able to put crisply enough the question he wanted to ask.

"What happened after Max knocked me out?" He had already begun exploring his pockets.

"He took an envelope," she said. "Out of that pocket; the first one he felt in. I suppose it must have been the ticket and trunk check he said you'd stolen from him. He didn't look inside. Just crammed it in his pocket and went out, as quickly as he could."

"How long ago was that? I mean, how long was I out?"

She turned away from him as she answered, "I don't know. It seemed a long time to me. I brought two glasses of water from the bathroom and threw them in your face. It must have been several minutes. That's why I got rather silly about it."

He'd have caught her up in his arms at that if she hadn't moved a step farther off, and asked in a very cool tone, "Was it something important that he got away with?"

"Won't you forgive me," he said, "for acting like a dog just now? It was because I was so furious with myself for being such an ass."

She smiled rather uncertainly at this zoological mixture and he, deciding to be content with that, went on to tell her as swiftly as he could how he'd seen Max carrying off her trunk and the stratagem by which he and Babe had got it away from him. "And then," he concluded, interrupting her attempt to tell him how clever she thought he'd been, "instead of leaving the thing in a safe place I came walking in here with it in my pocket and let him take it away from me. The thing for us to do," he decided, "is to get out of here and beat it to that baggage room."

"Do you suppose we can get out," she asked, "without their catching us? There is a little private elevator but I couldn't make it work."

"I know the way to the stairs," he told her. "That's how I got in."

Her hand slipped into his (he must be partly forgiven, anyhow) as after a reconnoitering glance they stole out into the corridor and took the first turning to the right. "That's the door to the stairway," Martin whispered, "right ahead."

But almost as he spoke there came from behind the door he pointed to the clatter of a metallic object falling down-stairs. Somebody on the other side of that door had just had an unforeseen encounter with Martin's waste-paper basket. Then, as they involuntarily stopped with held breath, they heard a key driven into the lock. Right at hand was a door, a little ajar, opening into what was probably a closet. Martin, catching Rhoda up with one arm as if she'd been a package, fairly lifted her inside and shut the door after them. They heard the stair door open, they heard steps along the corridor. But, instead of going by, the steps paused outside the closet door.

CHAPTER XIII

SOUND-PROOF

THAT pause had a galvanic effect upon the pair in the closet. Martin's arm was still clasped around Rhoda and the embrace which had begun as a strictly utilitarian one had changed its quality a little as Martin shut the door. If the steps had gone on by it's reasonably certain that he would have kissed her, and she was aware, by the sixth sense of lovers, of this intention of his when the steps stopped outside the door. The consequence of that awareness was that she broke sharply away from him and huddled back against the wall. Martin, a little chilled by the bruskness of her action, instead of following to a position beside her backed away in the opposite direction. His position was better than Rhoda's since if the door opened he would be behind it.

Why didn't it open? Why should any one stop in front of a closet door and not do anything about it?

The next moment the click of a key supplied the answer. For some reason this closet was supposed to

be kept locked. What sort of closet was it? Did they keep anything special shut up in here? It seemed ordinary enough. It was pitch dark now, of course, but there were clothes hooks behind Martin; what felt like an overcoat hanging from one of them. And his right hand reaching into the corner rested on a cane. That might come in handy, he thought, and he gripped it.

The door swung open, letting in quite a lot of light from the corridor, but at the same time cutting off his view of everything but the inner face of the door. He heard a gasp from Rhoda and a growled "What the devil!" in a man's voice. Conley's! There was a click of a switch and the closet light came on overhead.

"So this is where you've got to, is it?' Conley said. "I had an idea you were still on the premises. Well, the old man will be glad we haven't lost you." He added with a sudden accession of truculence that brought another gasp from the girl, "Come out of there!"

At that Martin shifted his grip on the cane, noting as he did so that its rubber shod ferrule was heavily weighted, and kicked shut the closet door with a slam.

The unexpected and unaccountable sound of that

door slammed to behind him must have frozen Conley for an instant, for he and Rhoda presented, as Martin first saw them, the effect of a tableau vivant, Rhoda backed flat against the wall—only was it a wall or was that middle panel in it a door?—Conley gripping her by one arm in the midst of his arrested attempt to haul her away. The next instant he turned, saw Martin and jumped for him.

Martin, who had already shortened his grip on the cane, knowing that he wouldn't have room in that closet for a full swing, met the rush with a back-hand stroke at the side of his assailant's head. With an ordinary walking stick this would have been a perfectly futile blow. Martin had recognized it as a real weapon the moment his hand had found it, but even so he was amazed and rather appalled at the effect of it upon Conley. Thanks to the thick rubber cap with which the ferrule was shod the impact was practically noiseless, but the big detective wilted and went down under it like a stockyards steer under the maul.

Rhoda and Martin gazed at each other aghast across him.

"It's all right," Martin said. "It's just another knockout, I guess. I must have caught him on the

jaw, too. He'll start coming to in a minute and then we can beat it out of here."

"Yes," Rhoda agreed, "that's what we'll do. I'm sure he'll be all right in a minute."

It may be noted that it didn't occur to either of them to go off and leave him before he showed some signs of coming to. He lay there in a deep stupor a disconcertingly long time. Rhoda, Martin noticed, was getting rather white. By way of diversion he asked, "Why do you suppose they keep this place locked up? What did he come in here for? There's nothing here but a couple of overcoats and this cane I hit him with."

"When he opened the door," Rhoda said, "he was coming straight toward me as if he knew I'd be standing right here. But he didn't know, because he jumped when he saw me. Martin, I can't stand it like this. Let's do something. Can't we open the door?"

He didn't answer instantly, or move. He was looking at the outlined panel in what appeared to be the wall behind her. She swayed slightly and caught for support at the nearest of the clothes hooks; then uttered a cry of astonishment as she started to fall, not forward but back. The thing she was leaning against *was* a door and it was swinging open behind her.

Martin sprang over Conley and caught her. Without a word the two of them stood staring into the strange little chamber which the opened door revealed, staring and drawing deep breaths of an air that seemed, after the overwhelming stuffiness of the closet, fresh and cool.

The first thing Martin did was to reach back and switch off the closet light, for there was plenty of light of a diffused sort, in that strange little chamber to see by. It was as if they were standing in the wings of a theater looking out on a very shallow stage. It was higher than the floor they were standing on, a flight of three steps leading up to it, and it had an opening like a small proscenium arch into an audience room. At their right, in the same wall with the proscenium arch but before you went up the stairs, was a narrow door.

The place was oddly furnished too, in a manner that suggested a stage set. It comprised one solid-looking black-oak, leather-seated chair in the mission style, more or less, a small square oak stool that evidently served the occupant to put his feet on, an oak table with a telephone of the new cradle type on it, and an ash-tray. The proscenium arch, which wasn't an arch but an oblong opening, didn't come clear to the floor of

the stage. It stopped thirty inches above it, and it wasn't an opening since it was filled by an enormous sheet of plate glass.

Rhoda, to Martin's consternation, said after she'd stood staring at it beside him for a minute, "I know what this is," and walked boldly up the three steps on to the stage.

Martin was so sure that she had completely betrayed their hiding-place to whoever might be out in that audience room where the light came in from that he darted back, stepping over the still unconscious Conley, to the locked corridor door, ready to fling it open for their flight. But Rhoda seemed perfectly at ease up there looking out curiously through the glass, and when she noted that he hadn't followed her she beckoned him imperatively to come.

He was more deeply mystified after he had obeyed her gesture and stood beside her, for it seemed to him that the man she was gazing at—an old bird whom Martin instantly recognized as the man he'd had a glimpse of in the limousine that morning—would see them as plainly as they saw him the moment he turned his head their way. He was sitting sidewise to his desk in a high-backed, leather-cushioned, swivel chair, smoking what was probably an after-dinner cigar and

reading, though with rather lightly held attention, a business document of some sort which he was holding in both hands.

"Isn't it great?" Rhoda whispered. "He can't see us no matter how hard he looks."

"How do you know he can't?"

Martin had pitched the question low but it wasn't voiceless, and she shot an apprehensive glance at the man in the swivel chair. "I don't believe he can hear us either," she said, "but we'd better be careful. Why, I know because I was in there—hours, this afternoon. This thing we're looking through is the picture over the fireplace. Conley must have been in here all the time Mr. Forster and I were talking. That's why he always came in at the right time. I thought he was listening, but he must have been watching instead. That's why there had to be an imitation fire instead of a real one. It's in this box."

She put her hand as she spoke on a wooden protuberance that was where the prompter's box would have been if this had been a grand opera stage. "I thought," she added, "that that picture looked sort of like stage scenery but I couldn't see through it at all. And there's glass on the front of it as well as on the back, so I don't believe he can hear."

It still seemed rather incredible even after Martin knew how the trick was done. There was a thin screen of theatrical gauze between the two plates of glass. You could see it was painted since it wasn't equally transparent all over, and the strong cross-lighting from just above the frame, which accounted no doubt for the curious filtered look of the light in the observation post, would be enough to prevent anything being seen through it, unless there was a light back here.

He checked his impulse to ask Rhoda what she'd been doing for hours and hours in the room they were looking into and what she meant by saying that Conley had always come in at the right time. What his mind fastened upon was her conclusion that Forster's bodyguard, stationed here where his eye could command the whole room, was not able to hear what the actors in the scenes he watched were saying. If that were true the converse was probably true also, that Forster wouldn't be able to hear any ordinary sounds. "He must be a timorous old rabbit of a rascal," he remarked, rather low but in his natural voice.

Rhoda was rather startled at this and admonished him to be careful, but she smiled in agreement with his characterization of Forster. And when she saw that

Martin's voice hadn't reached the old man's ears, she said in a tone that matched his, "He thought for a minute this afternoon that I'd come up to shoot him; made me take my hands out of my pockets. And Conley was in the room through that little door down there almost before I'd had time to do it. Only I don't see," she added, "why he wouldn't want him to listen as well as look."

"I think I do," Martin told her. "The poor old goat lives in terror of physical violence, you see. They know that down-stairs. Your friend, the bell-boy, told me about it. But in spite of that I imagine he's something of a crook. He must have to have lots of talks with people he's afraid to be left alone with. Well, a spy who could hear everything they said would have a pretty good hold on the old man if ever he wanted to use it.—Blackmail, don't you see? But he can watch from up here, ready to come in if he sees anybody make a pass at him, without ever knowing what it's all about."

It still seemed queer to be talking this way about a man as plainly in their view and as near as Forster was, and now he startled them both by a swift glance straight in their direction and a perceptible motion of the head that must have been some sort of signal.

They both started back precipitately, and Rhoda collided with the table, which moved with a protesting grunt much louder than their voices had been.

"It's all right," Rhoda said, "he didn't hear."

"I think I heard something, though," Martin said very quietly in her ear. Before he had finished speaking he knew what the sound was. "Conley's coming to, down there in the closet. We'd better beat it out of here while we have a chance."

This was to him so obviously the only thing for them to do that he started carrying it out at once. He was at the foot of the little flight of stairs before he realized she wasn't following. Conley was by now well along the road to recovering consciousness. In another minute he might again be formidable. Turning back impatiently to learn why Rhoda didn't come, he saw her gazing out through the glass with the utmost intentness, bright-eyed with excitement, utterly oblivious to their pressing need for haste.

"Hurry!" he called. "It will be too late if you don't."

She answered without turning her eyes away from whatever she was gazing at in the room. "I can't. Something's happening that I've got to watch. Claire Cleveland's in there with him."

If Martin could have been sure that he dared leave the prostrate detective alone long enough to dash back, pick Rhoda up and carry her out by force, he would probably have done it. He'd have liked to do it. He was furious with her just then. But already Conley had rolled over prone and was trying to get to his feet. Martin had just time to bestride him and drop hard with both knees on the small of the man's back. In almost the same instant he snatched his wrists and pulled them around so that they crossed behind his back. Conley's head hit the edge of the step pretty hard, and he went limp once more.

"I've got him now," Martin called to Rhoda. "Only for heaven's sake come along."

"I can't," she answered. Incredibly in the next breath she added, "I wish you wouldn't keep talking to me."

If she wouldn't come along he must manage to find out what she was doing up there. Some vague memory, probably of the movies, suggested an expedient. Holding the crossed wrists with one hand he unbuckled the man's trousers belt with the other, pulled it out through the loops and managed, after a little experimenting, to bind Conley's arms together in a way that he thought would hold.

He was about to leave him thus when a faint groan suggested another necessity, and simultaneously the sight of a white silk muffler dangling from the pocket of one of the overcoats hanging in the closet suggested the means of serving it. He'd never gagged anybody before and wasn't quite sure how it was done, but he succeeded in getting several folds of the thick silk between the relaxed jaws, and tied the ends tight at the back of the man's neck. Then he sprang up the steps to Rhoda and stood beside her, looking out through the glass at the scene she was so absorbed in watching.

Forster was still in his swivel chair sitting almost as he had sat when Martin looked at him before, but in the act of relaxing back into it as if he had just meant to get up and then had changed his mind. The Cleveland woman had only that moment seated herself in a chair at the end of the desk which faced the fireplace and the two watchers behind the glass. From the way that Rhoda reached out and squeezed Martin's hand when she saw Forster's visitor coming to rest in this particular chair, Martin perceived that this choice pleased her, though he didn't yet see why.

"She's looking wicked," he commented. "What do you suppose she's up to?"

Rhoda squeezed his hand tighter and said, "Don't talk! Listen!" And though this struck him as absurd, her earnestness enforced obedience.

The woman was worth watching, anyhow. It was his first good look at her. She was dressed as she'd been when he'd seen her descend upon Max and Babe in the station that afternoon. She had put on her hat and coat since leaving Max Lewis's sitting-room, and as she sat down in the chair she opened her wrist-bag before she put it down in her lap. There was something so insolently and viciously feline in her look—like a cat with its ears back—that Martin didn't wonder at old Forster's cringing in his chair and shooting a look at the picture behind which he must still suppose his spy to be on watch.

However, if she had a revolver in the bag she was content to leave it there for the present. What she produced from it now was a long amber cigarette holder and a package of cigarettes, one of which, very deliberately but with rather shaky hands, she proceeded to light. It appeared that these preliminaries irritated Forster, for he spoke with an impatient jerk of the head, telling her, no doubt, to state her business and be quick about it.

Her only response to this was a theatrical laugh, not

very convincing, and an elaboration of the processes of making herself comfortable in the chair. When presently she did begin to talk, it was with an affectation of lazy good humor, her eyes not upon him but upon the shred of blue smoke from her cigarette.

But it was Forster's face that Martin's gaze rested upon. He appeared at first to be genuinely, even blankly, puzzled as to what the woman was getting at, and he broke in upon her two or three times with sharp impatient questions to which she paid no attention whatever, continuing to eye her cigarette and to go evenly on with her narrative, if that were what it was. But it wasn't long before Forster's appearance changed. His body was rigid in his easy chair, and the laugh by which he attempted to dismiss something she said as an absurdity was a ghastly failure.

Now though, Martin's attention was sharply diverted from both actors in the play by a sob from Rhoda. Turning to her in consternation he saw her trying vainly to blink away the tears that were blurring her vision. She said furiously when he asked her what the matter was, "Don't talk! Give me a handkerchief, if you've got one."

He had a fresh one in his pocket and he was handing it over to her with dignity, inclined to feel a little

hurt by the way she was treating him, when, with a suddenness that literally almost took him off his feet, she flung herself upon him, put her head down upon his chest, and hugged him as hard as she could. This amazing and blissful state of things lasted while she was drawing about three long breaths and then, just as suddenly, she went, so to speak, into reverse again, flung herself away from him, snatched his handkerchief, dried her eyes, and began watching the scene through the glass with the most intense concentration.

He thought during the instant before his gaze followed hers that nothing in the world but Rhoda could be worth looking at just then and nothing seem of any importance except the question how long it would be before she would again come back into his arms. But he did look through the glass, and what he saw effectually held his attention.

The woman had abandoned her affectation of lazy amusement and at something he must have said to her, had burst into a rage. She had sprung to her feet and was fairly pouring vituperation over him by the bucketful. It was plain that he was terrified of her. If she'd been less absorbed in her own passion, she must have seen that he was signaling for help, for, feebly but with no concealment at all, he was looking and

waving his shaky hand straight toward where Martin and Rhoda stood.

There was a comic element in this scene which Martin had been enjoying, but now the woman made a move which startled him. She stepped back out of the possible reach of Forster's hand and, snatching up her wrist-bag from the corner of the desk, jerked it open.

"If she's got a gun in that bag she'll shoot him," Martin said to Rhoda, and would have jumped for the little door which led into the room if she hadn't stopped him by clutching his arm.

"No, she won't," she told him. "It's a letter she's looking for. I wish she would shoot him, though. I'd like to myself. He deserves it."

She had told what the woman's intentions were with a degree of confidence that was almost convincing. All the same it struck Martin as rather uncanny when seconds after Rhoda had finished speaking he saw Claire actually produce a letter from her wrist-bag, and, still taking care to keep out of Forster's reach, begin reading it aloud to him.

"Rhoda, darling," he cried, "how did you know she was going to do that?"

She stood looking at him now, face flushed, eyes

bright with tears, leaving the scene they had been watching so intently to play itself out unregarded. "I know all about it now." She stood wavering a moment and then came into his arms again, clinging to him, her face buried against his chest. He couldn't make out the muffled words very well, but he thought she was saying, "Aren't you glad we know? Aren't you glad the nightmare's over?"

Mystified, but none the less blissful, he said he was, and as he bent down over her she held up her face for his kiss with a simplicity that brought unexpected tears into his own eyes. This was something settled, anyhow, for good.

A raucous voice now broke in upon them—Conley's!—declaring with profane elaborations that he would be damned. They'd forgotten his very existence and had allowed him to come to and work out of his bandages at leisure. There could be no doubt of his intentions, particularly toward Martin, as he came bounding up the steps toward them, but an outcry and a gesture from Rhoda deflected his attention toward what was happening in the big room.

Forster, rummaging desperately with his half palsied hands in the shallow drawer of his desk, had pulled out a long-barreled, old-fashioned revolver, and

when, directed by Rhoda's cry, they looked, they saw the old man trying to point it at Claire. She flung herself upon him and grappled with him for the possession of it. This was a clear call of professional duty for the detective and he abandoned, though with visible reluctance, the private project with Martin to go to the rescue, springing down the steps and bursting open the door beside the fireplace just as the old-fashioned revolver, with a prodigious bang, went off.

CHAPTER XIV

THE FRAME-UP

THE report of the revolver was followed instantly by a scream from Claire. Rhoda and Martin, after exchanging one horrified look, followed Conley through the door, which he'd left open behind him.

The scene in the big room was enough to shatter a stronger nerve than Forster's. Claire lay on the floor at his feet, moaning, apparently unconscious, her face so covered with blood that it wasn't possible to see the exact nature of the wound. The revolver, a blue filament of smoke still rising from its barrel, lay on the carpet three or four paces away. Forster had fallen back limply in his chair. Evidently he thought he'd killed her, for he was bleating frantically, "I didn't do it! She did it herself! She pulled the trigger!" His voice rose to a yelp as he cried to Conley, "Take her away! Don't leave her lying there! Take her where I can't see her."

Conley picked her up in a matter-of-fact sort of way

which led Martin to think that he'd come to the same conclusion as his own, that she was not dangerously injured. Martin opened the door for him, but as soon as he'd gone out with his burden, closed it after him and turned back to Forster. It was apparently not until then that Forster realized that he and Rhoda were in the room. He looked from one to the other of them in bewilderment, and at last weakly demanded of Martin, "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"I'm the reporter from *The News,*" Martin said, "who wanted an interview from you about the disappearance of Rhoda McFarland. I came up to your apartment and found her here. We happened to be where we could see everything that's gone on in this room since that woman Conley just carried out came into it."

"More blackmail!" Forster snarled. "It's a conspiracy, that's what it is. You are *all* in it."

He looked as he said that like nothing in the world but a rat in a corner, darting helpless venomous glances this way and that; toward the picture over the fireplace, behind which he knew his body-guard was no longer on watch; toward the closed door through which no cry of his could be heard; even toward the revolver lying on the carpet, hopelessly out of his reach.

It was Rhoda who answered him. She was so pale Martin had feared that she might be going to faint. But the glittering timbre of her voice as she spoke convinced him that she was white only with anger. "There is only one conspiracy I know about," she said. "That's the conspiracy you went into with Claire Cleveland—only she was called Clara Bowman then—and the man who was your secretary—I think his name was Stafford."

Martin held his breath as he looked from one of their faces to the other.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Forster wheezed. But the consternation in his face proclaimed that she did know.

"You had your secretary hire her," Rhoda went on. "That's why you didn't know who she was when she came back here and got a job in your office. You didn't know that Stafford had told her who you were. And when he died you thought you were safe. You thought you didn't have to pay the money you'd promised her for ruining my father."

She turned away from him as if the sight of his goat-like face had become unendurable to her, and went on speaking to Martin. "That's what he did. They hired this woman—Stafford found her—to go west on

the same train my father was going on. They got her a berth right across the aisle from his. She was to cry and pretend she'd lost her ticket and her money, and get him to take pity on her and pay her fare. They must have known how kind he was and how innocent he was or they wouldn't have thought the trick would work. It did work, partly. He paid for her ticket and her berth and loaned her some money besides to buy her meals with on the train. The rest of the plan didn't work. He didn't even look at her. She said so herself to—*him*, just now. He never even guessed what she was trying to make him do. But she went ahead just the same—I suppose they'd promised her more money—and made her complaint before the District Attorney. And she testified against him at the trial, only the jury didn't believe her and set father free. But enough other people believed her so that he had to resign from the university and come out here, like a man in hiding, to go to work, without knowing it, for the very man who had ruined him." She whipped around upon Forster again, her eyes blazing with furious anger. "I wish she had shot you, instead!" she told him deliberately. "I wish she'd shot you dead. You deserve it, if any one ever did."

She happened to be standing, without knowing it,

almost over the revolver, where she had only to stoop to pick it up. Forster knew it, though. He was staring at the thing in a perfect nightmare of terror. Rhoda, pulled up by the look in his face, followed the direction of his stare and glanced down too to see what he was looking at.

That glance was all it needed to demolish him completely. He flopped out of his chair and sprawled down upon his knees on the carpet, holding out his palsied hands, imploring mercy. "Wait!" he pleaded. "Wait! I'll tell you all about it. It isn't what you think. It's nowhere near as bad as you think. I didn't mean him any real harm. I thought he'd thank me for it."

Rhoda went a little whiter and turned her face away. "Do you mind picking him up, Martin, and putting him back in his chair?" she asked.

Martin, feeling in his bewilderment like a man in a dream, tugged away and finally managed to haul the poor old ruin back into his chair again. It must have been a minute before the millionaire could find breath enough to speak with, but when he did it was—strangely enough—in the voice of a man with a grievance.

"McFarland was wasted, where he was. He knew as much about the chemistry of petroleum as any man

in the world; more in some ways. And he was nothing but a college professor working for four thousand dollars a year. I'd known he was working along a line I was interested in, and when I saw he was going to read a paper in Cleveland before the Oil Chemists' Institute I went down to hear him. Luckily he hadn't got far enough with his discoveries to give anything really practical away, but he came near enough to it to make me sweat. I could see what he was headed for, all right. So I saw him after the meeting and talked to him. I had Stafford with me and we came back with him as far as Chicago. Spent most of the night trying to get him to listen to reason. Here he was on the edge of a thing that might be worth millions to him personally, to say nothing of anybody else, and he was getting ready to broadcast it. I wanted him to leave the university and let me fit him up a laboratory. I'd pay all the expenses of his research and give him a contract that would make his fortune as soon as he had the thing on a practical basis. All he had to do was to go on as he'd been going, but keep it dark.

"I never saw anybody as stubborn as he was. He'd hardly listen. Practically told me to go to hell. He said the university had financed his researches up to now and it would be disloyal to leave them. He said the idea

of a university was to let light in on things, not to keep them dark. It didn't do any good to talk big figures to him. He didn't know what money was about. He was throwing away a fortune—anyway that's how it looked at the time—like giving a nickel to a newsboy. I was about ready to quit, but Stafford had an idea.

"I don't say it was a very nice idea, but your father hadn't left us anything else we could do. Stafford said if there should happen to be some little scandal out at the university so that McFarland would resign, he'd probably come back to us. He said it was always easy to start something about a college professor.

"Well, that's all. He went ahead with it. I didn't know what he was going to do. He went too far; further than I meant him to. I didn't think there'd be a trial. I thought McFarland would realize there was something on him and get out quietly. Only, you see, he was so innocent he didn't realize there *was* anything on him. And when the thing really got started it was too late to stop."

Rhoda's set face conceded him nothing, and cringing away from the sight of it he turned to Martin. "*You* can see how it was, can't you? I didn't know he'd take it so hard. I didn't mean him any real harm. I meant to make him a rich man."

With an effort Martin pulled himself together, stopped wondering over Rhoda's mysteriously acquired knowledge and, as well as he could in his ignorance, grappled with the existing situation.

"You didn't make his fortune, though," he said to Forster. "Why not? How did you trick him out of it?"

"I didn't trick him out of it," Forster answered, with more assurance than he'd shown before. "I gave him a perfectly fair contract. I fitted up a laboratory for him, paid all his bills for supplies, and gave him a hundred dollars a week in cash for his personal expenses. I kept that up for four years. It must have cost me altogether forty or fifty thousand dollars. He was always just going to find the thing he needed to make his discovery practical, but he never did. Maybe he would have found it if he hadn't died, but it wasn't my fault that he had heart failure, was it?"

Rhoda flashed into the scene again. "Then why did you offer Claire Cleveland one hundred thousand dollars just now for the contract you made with my father?"

Forster had to gulp twice before he could answer. "I didn't mean anything by that. I was kidding her, you might say. I knew she hadn't got it. She hadn't, either."

Rhoda confirmed that with a nod before she went on. "But then you told her to send for it. You said, 'Send for whatever you've got and have it brought up here just as it is.' That meant my trunk, I suppose, that you thought she'd stolen. You told her to send any messenger she liked; you told her to send your nephew Max. You said he'd been doing odd jobs for her lately and that he knew his way around her flat. You were trying to make her angry, but you held your breath while you waited to see whether she would send for the trunk or not."

Forster turned to Martin as one who makes another appeal to reason. "Why would I hold my breath? I knew she hadn't any contract. I knew the man who did have it. I'd seen him just this afternoon. I told him it wasn't worth a nickel, just like I told her."

There was a kink in this, Martin perceived, but he hadn't time now to try to straighten it out. Rhoda's references to her trunk and to Max recalled to his mind something urgent that he'd clean forgotten about for the past hour or so. He turned to Rhoda, meaning to suggest casually that there was no point in their staying here any longer, but she looked so white and limp, now that the fire of anger had burned down, that he went and put his arm around her instead.

Her head drooped down on his chest, and he heard her say, "Take me away, Martin. I feel as if I couldn't breathe up here any longer."

"All right, dearest," Martin said, and without a glance at Forster started leading her toward the door.

Just before they reached it Conley opened it and came into the room. But he didn't, as Martin for an instant feared he would, offer to hinder their going out. He had something else on his mind. "The woman's all right," they heard him say to his employer as they left the room. "She's got a bullet hole through her cheek and she's lost a couple of teeth, but that's all the damage." In his excitement he neglected to close the door, and the departing pair, before they rode down in the little private elevator, were able to hear how the old man took the news.

"That means more blackmail," he wailed. "Where's Max? He'll have to get me out of this."

Down in the lobby Martin and Rhoda paused. She seemed a long way off from him, somehow. Knowing how tired she was and what a storm she'd been through, he felt that he couldn't bear to tell her she must come with him now to the railway station in the hope that they wouldn't be too late to prevent Max from making off again with that trunk of hers.

Luckily she spoke first. "I don't think I want to go home," she said. "So I'd better telephone Babe and let her know we're all right. She won't know what has become of us."

This was an obvious duty, and as five minutes wasn't likely to matter much, now, one way or the other at the railway station, Martin assented.

Rhoda gave him something else to think about when she paused outside the door of a booth she'd been on the point of entering and asked him to telephone instead. She looked awfully white.

"Rhoda, are you all right?" he demanded earnestly. He must have shouted it rather, for a man turning the leaves of a directory at the desk looked up curiously at the pair of them. He went on speaking lower, "I mean, are you faint or anything?"

She said she wasn't. She just didn't feel like talking to Babe. She'd sit in that big chair over there and wait for him. She gave him their telephone number just before she walked away in case he'd forgotten it.

The promptness with which Babe answered the call suggested that she'd been sitting within hand's reach of the instrument ever since Martin had left her, and indeed she assured him passionately that this had been

the case. She was furious with him for not having called sooner and wasn't easily to be convinced that this was his first opportunity. She'd been having a perfectly rotten evening, she said. She'd been obliged to break an awfully good date in order to stand by the telephone, and then Max Lewis had come and really acted rough. She'd had to threaten to telephone for the police in order to get rid of him.

"What did he want with *you?*" Martin demanded.

"Naturally," said Babe, "he wanted his ticket and his trunk check."

"But he had them," Martin told her. "He took the envelope out of my pocket an hour ago, after he'd knocked me cold with a crack in the jaw."

"Well, he didn't think he had them fifteen minutes ago when he left here," she assured him.

"Wait a minute," Martin said, and laid down the receiver for a search of his pockets. "It's all right," he told Babe a minute later. "I've got them. What he got out of my pocket was your dummy envelope, the one you fooled him with in the first place. I don't wonder he looked sick. Well, don't worry about us any more," he concluded, "and don't expect us till we turn up."

"So I'm to go to bed and not wait up for the young

folks," Babe commented. She sounded rather annoyed to Martin, though he couldn't see why she should be.

"How long is it," he asked Rhoda when he went back to her, "since you've had anything to eat?"

"I don't know," she told him absently. "Not since I had lunch at the Tip-Top Inn. I don't remember whether I ate anything then or not."

"Well, then, that's the first thing to attend to," he announced. "I'm going to take you somewhere and get you a good dinner."

"I couldn't," she said, "I know I couldn't swallow a mouthful." Then, with a flash of animation in her tear-flushed eyes, she looked up at him and went on, "I know what I want to do, Martin. I want you to take me to the morgue."

He didn't for an instant recognize his own newspaper slang and stared at her in consternation until she added, "I want to read all it says about father; everything. Every horrible thing they did to him. Can we do it to-night, or will the paper be all locked up?"

He glanced at the clock across the lobby. It was just after nine. "The place will be locked up, all right, but there'll be a watchman at the door who'll let us in. That makes it all the better because we'll have the place to ourselves."

She looked so pitiful as she thanked him that it was hard to refrain from kissing her then and there. He did it, however, and, guessing from the way she huddled down in the corner of the seat in the taxicab which conveyed them down-town that she didn't want to be made love to, he went on refraining even from trying to get possession of one of her hands.

The watchman was an old friend of Martin's and he let them in without comment, though not without a good deal of visible curiosity. They climbed the stairs in silence. He led the way into the file room, pulled a chain that flooded the room with a glare of cold white light, and after not more than two minutes' search, pulled out a manila folder that had the name "Walter Whitehouse McFarland" written across the face of it. He laid it on the table, moved up a chair for her, and was on the point of withdrawing to leave her to herself when she reached out a hand and drew him back to her. "I want you to read it too," she said. "Do you mind, Martin?"

He didn't wonder when the brutal head-lines above these old newspaper cuttings assaulted his eyes that to the girl the thing had been a nightmare. What he marveled at was her courage in confronting it now and being willing to share it with him. He experienced a

strange jumble of emotions during the silent hour that it took them to read all the contents of that file.

One of the earliest to assail him, and one of the most disconcerting, was a momentary disgust for his own profession. Here was the material that they had gathered to make up the life story of a man; a man who had lived to be fifty years old and had devoted those years, with an extraordinary singleness of mind, to useful service. And yet, except for a few minor clippings, a casual stickful here or there regarding papers that he'd read before learned societies, studies of chemical processes, modest announcements of discoveries, the whole content of the file concerned itself with what might or might not have happened during a ride on the train from Chicago to California; whether or not an acquaintance he had formed with a girl in an attempt to relieve her apparent distress had resulted in a sexual intimacy. And, at that, the verdict of the jury had been that it had not so resulted. Yet the doubt that remained in the public mind after the verdict of the jury had been brought in had been enough to ruin the man's career, to force his resignation from the faculty of the university, to drive him into hiding for the last four years of his broken life.

The newspapers had done it and they had done it

without transgressing their own code. The story of a college professor indicted and brought to trial under the Mann Act was legitimately entitled according to current standards to just such head-lines and pictures and editorial comment as this story had received. It made Martin feel pretty sick.

Well, there was no help for anybody in thinking thoughts like that.

They were diverted by a picture included in one of the clippings of the girl then called Clara Bowman, who had been the principal witness of the trial. She was unmistakably Claire, despite the dark hair that was piled high on top of her head.

"Rhoda," he asked, "how did you know who she was? How did you know what she was saying to Forster? We couldn't hear a sound through the glass."

A smile flickered across her face, the first he'd seen there in a long while. "I forgot," she explained. "It seemed like listening to me. I can read lips, you see. Martin dear, don't you remember long ago at the Alhambra, how I saw you ask me if I didn't want to be rescued? And you asked me afterward how I knew the exact words you said, and I laughed and told you it was telepathy? I lost some of it to-night, of course, when they turned their faces away. But

whenever I could see their faces I could hear just as well as if I'd been in the room."

He sat silent for a while after that, not exactly thinking, but enjoying the savor of the term of endearment she had unconsciously used. When his mind got back on the rails he took up the kink in Forster's explanation, which he had been conscious of not straightening out at the time Forster made it.

What the old man had said about the contract seemed straight enough, and squared with the facts as Martin knew them. If Rhoda's father had died, as apparently he had, before completing his discovery, it was obvious that the contract was of no value. Claire, though, apparently thought it was valuable. There seemed to be no doubt that it was the thing she'd been trying all along to steal. It wasn't incredible that if Forster knew she'd failed to get it (since he knew in whose hands it actually was) he might have offered her a hundred thousand dollars for it in pure malice, as he said. But Forster did think that it was Claire who'd stolen Rhoda's trunk, and unless Rhoda's observation had been at fault, he had held his breath while he waited to see whether she would rise to his bait or not.

He knew the contract wasn't in the trunk. But didn't he believe that something else was, something

that he wanted very much, something, perhaps, he felt he couldn't be happy without?

That seemed highly probable to Martin. Why, unless there was something among her father's papers that he wanted, had he spent all those weeks advertising for Rhoda? Why had he sent his man Conley to run down the tip Babe Jennings had given him over the telephone? Why had he himself taken the trouble to lie in wait outside the studio in order to identify Rhoda for himself and find out where she worked?

The only answer Martin could see to all these questions was that Forster believed Rhoda had something he wanted. He looked up at her doubtfully, torn between his impatience to examine the contents of that little trunk to-night and his reluctance, after all she'd been through to-day, to subject her to any more experiences, possibly harrowing. To his surprise he found her looking at him, with eyes alight and a faint flush of color in her cheeks.

"Martin," she asked, "will you do something for me to-night? I know it's getting late and you must be tired . . ."

"I'll do anything," he said. "Rhoda dearest, you know I will. Any possible thing that you want me to do."

"What I want you to do," she said, "is to write the whole story to-night: what they did to father six years ago, Forster and Stafford and Claire, so that it can be in to-morrow's paper." The look in his face must have answered her, for at that point she broke off to ask incredulously, "Why not? Martin, do you mean you won't even write it to-morrow?"

"I can't write it," he said. "Or if I did the boss would kill it."

"Why?" she asked blankly.

"It isn't news. News is what happened to-day. If there's a peg to hang it on you can go back. But there's only one peg I can think of strong enough to hold that story: if we could go before the grand jury and get Forster and Claire indicted for conspiracy. But I don't believe we could get the State's Attorney to listen to it. Claire couldn't testify against Forster without incriminating herself, and he couldn't testify against her without incriminating himself, so the fact that they hate each other doesn't do us any good. And the go-between is dead. If we ran the story without something definite like that to hang it on we'd be in for a million-dollar libel suit before night. His shooting her would make it news if she'd talk; but she won't. She's got him—as long as she keeps still."

Rhoda didn't protest nor argue the matter with him, but he saw the light die in her eyes and the color fade out of her cheeks again. He struggled miserably on for a while with his explanation, but he could see it was nothing but words to her, words hardly worth listening to. She asked him at last not to talk about it any more; told him she understood and said she wanted to go home.

She helped to gather up the scattered contents of the file and as he was putting it back in the drawer she patted him on the shoulder and told him not to mind.

"I think there must be some other way," he told her hesitatingly, "of doing the thing we want to do; of setting your father's memory right before the world. I think I've got the beginning of a hunch how it can be done. I'm hoping for some light on it to-morrow when we go through that trunk. Rhoda dear, don't worry any more about it to-night. You're all in and you're half starved. Let's go somewhere and have a good dinner."

"I don't want to go to a restaurant," she told him flatly. "I want to go home."

"All right," he agreed, and they started down the long flights of stairs in silence. But before they got

within range of the night watchman at the door she stopped and faced him.

"I don't know why I'm so beastly," she said. "I suppose it's because I'm trying not to cry. I'll go anywhere you like, Martin." She gave him a rueful heart-twisting little smile as she said it, but she walked straight on without giving him a chance to kiss her.

It was with a notion of giving the old watchman a tip, as he sometimes did, that he put his hand into his pocket and thus made the disgusting discovery that he was penniless. So, out on the sidewalk as they were looking up the street for a taxi, he asked Rhoda, rather diffidently, if she could lend him any money. He'd given his last dollar to the taxi driver who'd brought them here.

But she told him, with a momentary flicker of amusement in her tone, that she had given *her* last dollar to a taxi driver that afternoon. She searched her purse, however, and announced a find of six cents. "If you've got a dime," she concluded, "we can ride in the street-car. And if you haven't we can walk."

He hadn't a dime but denounced a walk as nonsense. They'd take a taxi round to his club and he'd go in and get some money. That was what he should have done in the first place.

They didn't precisely quarrel over this, though she insisted on walking home and had her way.

He knew she didn't mean to be unfriendly. She even slipped her hand within his arm as they walked along, and left it there. But, even so, she felt a million miles away. They tried to talk but gave it up, and by the time they'd got to the street door of the studio building, the silence between them had become a palpable oppressive thing.

She asked him now, in a strictly neutral voice, whether he was coming in.

"I'll go up with you to your own door anyhow," he said, and they climbed the two long flights of stairs side by side without another word.

There was a light shining through the crack under the studio door and they could hear Babe in there talking to somebody. But Rhoda had her key in her hand and she thrust it into the lock and swung the door open without even a momentary pause for a private farewell on the landing. Martin stepped aside. He wouldn't go in. He'd be damned if he would.

But in the instant that Rhoda pushed open the door the man to whom Babe had been talking spoke, and at the sound of his voice Rhoda stopped as if she'd been suddenly frozen. The man's voice broke off.

Babe, who sat where she could see through the doorway, said, "Here they are," and Rhoda came to life again in a surprising way. She flung herself upon Martin like a child at the sight of an ogre. Martin heard her say in a broken voice, "It's Uncle William! Martin, don't—don't let him . . ."

Martin's arms came around her and pulled her closer still, and as he gazed over her head at Babe's astounded face, he whispered to Rhoda, "Don't you worry, darling. He can't do anything to you now. You're engaged to me."

CHAPTER XV

WHAT WAS IN THE TRUNK

RHODA'S sob of assent to this perhaps unique proposal of marriage marked the end of her moment of panic. She walked into the room steadily enough, though still in the embrace of Martin's right arm, and under the now startled gaze of their rather unaccountable visitor. How he'd managed to find her despite Forster's refusal this afternoon to tell him where she lived wasn't so puzzling as the consciousness that she'd seen him somewhere, without knowing who he was, only a little while ago. Even this minor bewilderment was not what kept her rooted to the rug while Babe was stammering out a superfluous introduction (Babe's scrambled condition was due, of course, to what she'd seen through the doorway) and he, pompous yet a little embarrassed, stood waiting, apparently, for a welcome appropriate to long-lost uncles. The really astonishing thing was that he wasn't an ogre at all. He wasn't much taller than

Martin, and he had perfectly normal, human-looking eyes and teeth. Why had she ever been afraid of him?

It wasn't until she heard Martin murmur again, "It's all right, darling," that she released herself from his arm, said, "How do you do, Uncle William," and went up and shook hands with him. She thought he expected to be kissed but she couldn't manage that.

He said, heavily, "How do you do, my dear. I'm very glad to have found you at last. I thought this afternoon that I must expect a long search, but this evening just after dinner I saw you in the lobby of the Worcester Hotel and heard this young man call you Rhoda. There was enough of your mother's look about you so that I called up the telephone number I had heard you give him . . ." (Yes, that was who it was, of course. The man who'd been looking at the telephone directory when she and Martin were calling up Babe to tell her they were all right.) "So I took the liberty of coming here and waiting for you, late as it was. I felt it was important that I see you at once."

"I'm glad you did," Rhoda told him, not in the manner in which one says something polite but as if she really meant it. She dimly remembered something

about him and thought she had an idea. "You're a lawyer, aren't you?" she asked.

He seemed a little surprised at the question but answered stiffly, "Yes, that is my profession."

"Well then," said Rhoda, "you're just the person we want. You see, Martin and I . . ." She broke off there to remedy an omission by introducing the two men in due form. After they'd shaken hands, a strictly non-committal ceremony on both sides, Rhoda went on. "You see, Martin and I have just found out what really happened to my father—before his trial, I mean—that made him leave the university."

Uncle William's reception of this statement was not encouraging. He began to look a little more like the ogre Rhoda remembered. "That is not a matter for discussion," he boomed. "Certainly not now."

But Rhoda was no longer a little girl of twelve. "It's got to be discussed," she contradicted him crisply, "and now is the best time to do it. Martin's a reporter but he says the paper can't print the true story, even though we know it's true, unless we have Mr. Forster indicted."

"Forster indicted!" Uncle William exploded. "C. J. Forster? Perfect nonsense! What has Forster to do with it?"

"It won't seem so much like nonsense," Rhoda said, "when you know what he's got to with it. Tell him, Martin."

Uncle William's attitude and gesture showed that he meant to protest, but before he could speak Martin cut in.

"Forster admitted to Rhoda and me this evening that the whole case against her father was a frame-up. The woman was planted on the train and instructed to pretend she'd lost her ticket in order to trick Professor McFarland into paying her fare. He fell for the trick but he didn't fall for her. She admits that herself. But she went ahead, under instructions, and perjured herself on the stand. Forster's motive was to force Professor McFarland's resignation from the university so that he'd come to work for him, which is what happened. Forster never paid the woman the money he promised her. And it was her quarrel with him that enabled us to find out about it. That's the bones of the story. It would take an hour to give you all the details, but we've got them and we'll furnish you with them whenever you like—now or later."

Rhoda's gaze from the time Martin had begun speaking had been fixed upon her uncle's face. She'd seen him wilt; she'd have said he actually sagged and

spread a little, like a partly deflated balloon tire. But before her lover had finished speaking he managed somehow to pump himself up again.

He said now, in his booming voice, "I don't want the details at this or at any time. There's no possible good to be gained by raking up that old story. And it could do harm in more ways than one. The scandal hurt the university at the time. It's forgotten now, and as president of the board of trustees, which I happen to be, I should be unwilling to see it revived."

"Revived!" Rhoda blazed at him. "We aren't going to revive it; we're going to kill it. We're going to prove that it wasn't true."

"You're going to *attempt* to prove that it wasn't true," Uncle William answered, "and that, my dear child, is a very different thing. Your father is dead. Technically there is no stain on his character, since the jury acquitted him. Any attempt to go beyond that, even if there were no other aspects of the affair to be considered, would be most unwise."

Rhoda didn't know what he could have meant by that. She would hardly have noticed that he'd said it if she hadn't been aware that Martin looked at him with suddenly sharpened interest. She found herself overpowered by hopeless anger and she knew that in

another minute, in spite of herself, she was going to begin to cry. Her eyes were already blurred with tears but she put the last spurt of her energy into a final appeal.

"Don't you remember," she reminded him, "the things you said to him the day you came to our house after the trial and tried to make him give me up to you?"

"I don't remember," he retorted, "having said anything that went beyond what the situation seemed to call for. But that's not what I want to talk about to-night. It's not the reason I came all the way from California to find you."

Rhoda, turning desperately away from him, saw a harbor and went to it, in Babe's arms. She heard what William Royce went on saying, but with no other emotion than a passionate wish that he would stop talking.

"Your father wrote to me shortly before his death requesting me to take care of you and look after your interests. I couldn't find you at that time. The management of the hotel where you had lived informed me that you had gone to live with friends in Denver. I assumed you were in good hands and there seemed to be nothing more for me to do in the matter until

I saw recently in a San Francisco paper an advertisement for your whereabouts. Seeing that, I came to the conclusion that a certain contract which your father had enclosed with his letter might have a value for you, and that you ought to be found."

"Good lord!" Martin exclaimed. "Do you mean to say you've got the contract that everybody has been trying to steal? Did you see Forster this afternoon and tell him you had it?"

"I refer," said Uncle William majestically, "to a contract which my late brother-in-law entered into with C. J. Forster. I was speaking to my niece. I can not see that it concerns you in any way."

"Everything that concerns Rhoda concerns me," Martin told him. "She and I are engaged to be married."

"Humph!" snorted Uncle William.

He was a perfectly terrible person. Martin didn't wonder that poor Rhoda had changed her name and hidden herself away from him like a frightened little rabbit. Martin could see him now majestically pausing before he hurled a thunder-bolt.

"If," he said, "your matrimonial intentions toward my niece are in any way predicated upon your knowledge of the existence of that contract, I think it only

right to tell you that it is of small value and doubtful validity."

"That's what Forster told us this evening," Martin observed. "He said he had told you that it wasn't worth a nickel."

"I'll have no more of this impertinence," Uncle William roared. "You can't marry my niece. She's still a minor, and I shall never consent . . ."

"Look here," Martin interrupted him, "we don't like each other at all, but there's no good in our quarreling unless we have something to quarrel about. And unless you're Rhoda's legal guardian I can't see that we have. Are you?"

"I'm her natural guardian," said Uncle William.

"Not her legal one, then," Martin observed. But as he turned to Rhoda he saw a panic awake once more in her eyes. "We won't have any more of this tonight," he went on. "Rhoda's had a terrible day, and she's come clear to the end of it. I'm going to ask Babe to put her to bed at once. I'll go back with you to your hotel and put you abreast of the situation."

This was a Napoleonic move. Babe came into action instantly. Before he finished speaking she was leading Rhoda toward the little stairway that went up to the loft where their bedrooms were.

Martin followed along to the foot of the stairs. "She's not to get up in the morning," he told Babe as if he were a doctor giving a nurse instructions about an unconscious patient, "—at least not until late. I'll come around some time after ten with the documents and we'll go down to the baggage master and get her trunk."

Then, ceasing to treat Rhoda as if she were unconscious, he kissed her and she heard him murmur, his lips so close to her ear that it tickled, "Don't you worry, darling. The hunch is coming along all right. You leave Uncle William to me."

Evidently Martin was the right sort of person to leave him to. Her last glimpse from the balcony was of her uncle, smoldering and fuming like Vesuvius getting ready for an eruption but going out just the same through the door Martin held open, obedient after all.

When Rhoda really waked up the next morning—rather a long process after an unusually solid night's sleep—she felt very adult and sensible. She didn't precisely regret her childish terror of the night before, since it had brought out once more what a peach Martin was. She didn't believe he liked her the less for it, either. He was like that. He understood

things. But her line with him when he came this morning to take her down to the station and get the trunk must be one of sturdy common sense. Above all she must let him see instantly that she took their pretended engagement as a brilliantly clever maneuver for outflanking Uncle William and nothing else. It would be terrible if he were left to think for a single minute that she thought that he meant it seriously.

Except for the expedition to recover the trunk there was no reason why she shouldn't have gone to work this morning as usual, although it had been fun to pretend to be asleep while Babe was making all sorts of sudden and calamitous noises in her effort to get dressed and get her breakfast in perfect silence, and really to fall asleep again for another twenty minutes after the studio door had slammed behind her. But by half past nine she'd finished her own breakfast, washed the dishes, put the studio to rights and, dressed for the street, was wishing that Martin had set his hour earlier. He had said ten o'clock, hadn't he?

When ten o'clock passed without bringing him, she began getting cross. Had he just gone off to work as usual and forgotten all about her? At half past ten she stopped being cross and began to be frightened.

Had Uncle William done some horrible thing to him to get him out of the way? Or Claire, with a pearl handled revolver, this time, in her little wrist-bag? Or Max Lewis, or Conley? He'd been making formidable enemies in her cause, hand over fist, during the last twenty-four hours.

When finally a few minutes after eleven she heard a step she thought was his come bounding up the studio stairs and had darted to the door and flung it open, she was so glad to see him intact that her eyes filled up with silly tears again and she was in his arms before she knew it. Thus a carefully planned effect went all to smash. A short rapturous eternity then went by, the details of which she was afterward unable to remember except for the electrifying discovery that Martin was trembling too and that his eyes were wet.

But by and by, over on the divan, Martin made a confession. "I'd fully made up my mind," he told her, "that I'd be very calm and brotherly this morning and at least give you a chance to think, if you wanted to, that the whole thing had been a bluff for Uncle William's benefit. I told myself I'd be a dog to take advantage of you. It wasn't the money I minded so much—I mean the chance that you're going to be horribly rich. That

was what was worrying Uncle William, of course. But I reminded myself that you'd only known me about a week, and you were a mere child and probably didn't know what love was about, and how much nobler it would be if I showed you I wasn't just greedy and was willing to wait. And then I took one look at you and it all went bang. It is outrageous and indefensible, and everything else Uncle William said last night. And I will wait; I'll wait seven years if you want me to. But do you think that could make you any surer?"

"I think," she told him, "that if you'd said that first night at the Alhambra, 'Will you marry me?' instead of 'Do you want to be rescued?' I'd have nodded my head at you just the same. Anyhow, I've known since then."

"Well, then," he said, "that's settled, anyhow," and he let go one of her hands to fish a ring out of his waistcoat pocket and slip it on her finger.

It was a blindingly beautiful thing, and she sat gazing at it, spellbound, for about a minute, trying to realize what it was and what it meant. But when she turned back to Martin to thank him with a kiss, she caught him in the act of looking at his watch. Even without that she could have told from the way his kiss felt that he had something on his mind.

"What is it?" she asked. "Are you thinking about that old trunk? Does it matter if we don't get it this morning? Does anything matter?"

"There's only one thing that matters," he said, getting up and moving away a little to put himself out of temptation, "and that's your father. I think perhaps we can do something if we strike while the iron is hot. I haven't got it clear enough to talk quite good sense about it, but it's a little like the old woman and the pig that wouldn't get over the stile. Do you remember, 'Stick won't beat dog, dog won't bite pig'? You see, the only person who can set your father's memory right before the university world—and that's the only world he cared about—is Uncle William, who is president of the board of trustees out there. Uncle William's the pig, all right. He knows the facts and I think he believes them. But he won't get over the stile until somebody bites him on the leg."

"Who's going to bite him?" she asked. But when he answered, "Forster," she echoed the name in simple astonishment.

"I can't guess what it is, darling," he told her, "but there's something in that little trunk of yours that Forster thinks he can't live without. I want to find out what it is and hurl it at him while he's still

frightened. He is frightened half out of his wits. He's making Max marry that Cleveland woman. I saw them, this morning, down at the city hall, she with her face all bandaged up and Max looking as glum as if he was waiting to be sentenced to a term in the penitentiary, with Conley on guard to see that he didn't do a bolt, waiting for the marriage license bureau to open up."

Gazing at him wide-eyed she saw him flush like a schoolboy, and at that she flew at him and hugged him. She couldn't help it. "Did you get ours, too?" she asked.

He nodded. "I thought it was better," he said, "—just in case of emergency. That's what I told myself at the time. But will you, Rhoda, now? Before we go and get the trunk? St. Timothy's is just around the corner. I know the curate and he'll be there."

"I'll get my hat and coat," she said.

And it wasn't more than ten minutes before she found herself being married by a hearty young man who had, it seemed, put out his pipe just before he'd put on his cassock.

She wondered later, when she had time to think things over, about how vague an impression this service made upon her. She was barely able to remember any-

thing about it. On the other hand, every word Martin had said during their walk to the church was etched deep upon her memory. The force of his purpose to set up her father's name again in its proper place, cleansed of the mud of scandal and suspicion; the fact that he had a plan and that until he had set that plan in motion everything else, even love-making, would have to wait, put a new dimension into her love for him.

From the church door they took a taxi to the railway station, found the trunk without misadventure, and took it back to the studio. By that time they were both wildly excited over the mystery of its contents. Martin was trying to be calm, and insisted upon being maddeningly methodical about their preparation for opening it. They had to clear everything out of one corner of the studio until they had a ten foot space absolutely bare before he would let her unlock it. But she saw his hands trembling as he tugged at the straps.

What they found was just what she dimly remembered the contents to have been, sheets of yellow paper covered with notes, equations and diagrams. Some of them looked to her like gigantic magnifications of a child's game of naughts and crosses. Pictures of molecules, Martin said he guessed they were, but it was all, he frankly admitted, considerably worse than

Greek to him. There was an enormous amount of it, thousands of sheets. Several thousand. They began taking them out reverently, one at a time. Then they took them out by handfuls. There was no sort of order to them, apparently. It wasn't conceivable that this mass of stuff was anything that Forster wanted.

Well then, what else was in the trunk? They got to the bottom of it at last and gazed at each other with eyes blank with disappointment. It seemed there was nothing in the trunk but those yellow sheets. The lining was of old-fashioned striped ticking and it was intact; nothing could have slipped down inside. There was an envelope in the lid but it was empty.

Rhoda said shakily, "Well, that's all, Martin. Claire thought the contract was in the trunk and she was mistaken. Mr. Forster thought something else was in it and he must have been mistaken, too."

Stubbornly he shook his head. "That's possible," he admitted, "but I won't believe it yet. I think what Forster wants is here and if I weren't such a fool I could see what it is. I'm going to try to get this stuff into some sort of order. It's all dated, had you noticed? in little numerals up in the corner of each sheet."

Rhoda got up stiffly and announced her intention of getting lunch. "I'm going to cook my husband's first

meal." He smiled at that, but only vaguely, and didn't offer to come and help, so she made coffee and heated up a can of corned beef hash and set the little table while he continued to sit on the floor in a brown study, shuffling his yellow papers.

They were so occupied when Babe, it being Saturday, came home from work, unaware that she was looking at a married couple. Rhoda told her promptly and her exuberant joy over the news combined with her fury at not having been invited to the wedding produced the effect of an active young tornado. She hugged Rhoda and kissed Martin, and berated them both in her best manner all the time. It didn't last long. She couldn't stop for lunch as she had a very promising date for the football game that afternoon and had only flown in to dress. She kept rushing out of her bedroom in the loft, half clad, to hurl insults down at them from the balcony and then rushing in again.

It was right in the midst of this tumult that Martin announced a discovery. "There are about a hundred of these sheets that are written in lead pencil, but all the others are carbon copies. The penciled sheets aren't different in any other way that I can see from the carbons. They're in the same handwriting, anyhow. Can you make anything of that?"

Rhoda was busy opening the hot can of hash and she said she couldn't.

Just after Babe went out she saw him get up, in a preoccupied sort of way, and go over to the telephone. He called the Worcester Hotel, asked for Uncle William and got him. Then he said, "This is Martin Forbes. Rhoda and I were married this morning. We're going to have a conference this afternoon at three o'clock and we'd like you to be here if you can, and bring the contract between Forster and Professor McFarland with you."

It seemed strange to Rhoda that she didn't see any blue flames from the receiver licking about Martin's ear. Uncle William was even, judging from Martin's fragmentary replies, being polite. "What's happened to him?" she asked as Martin hung up. "Didn't he breathe any fire at all about our being married?"

"Oh, no, he took that all right. I thought he would."

He spoke absently and she saw he was getting ready to telephone again. This call was even more astonishing. It was the Worcester again and he asked for Mr. Forster's apartment. He recognized the answering voice, for he said, "Conley? Take this message for Mr. Forster. Say that Miss McFarland has recovered her father's trunk and if the contents of it

interest him, as we believe they will now we've examined them, he can come to her studio this afternoon at three o'clock and discuss what's to be done about them. Find out if we're to expect him, will you?" There was a breathless pause of about a minute. Then Martin said, "All right. Three o'clock," and hung up.

There was a queer, rather scared look in his face as he turned back to her.

"Martin," she cried, "have you found it?—have you found the thing he wants?"

He shook his head. "I haven't found a thing," he told her. "But now, you see, I've *got* to find it. There's nothing like a dead-line to stimulate the wits of a reporter."

She did get him to stop his labors long enough to sit down with her to lunch, but it wasn't a convivial meal. "Do you walk in your sleep?" she asked him. "I should think you would, since you can eat that way."

His smile acknowledged that the gibe was merited but he didn't reply to it. As soon as he had swallowed what was on his plate he took his cup of coffee and went back to the floor.

He was still there when Uncle William came; so strangely transformed an Uncle William that Rhoda forgot all about Martin for several minutes. There

wasn't a trace of the ogre left about him. He jocosely claimed the right to kiss the bride and did it, said, as he patted her on the back, that he thought she was going to be very happy, and reproached her playfully for having kept him in the dark about something, though what it was she couldn't at first make out. It was not, it seemed, her unpremeditated marriage this morning. He said he quite understood their acting as they had done about that and thought that in the circumstances it had been wise.

Then he began apologizing to Martin. He was afraid his manner last night when he had been quite in the dark as to who Martin really was, he having merely been told that he was a reporter, hadn't been quite appropriate.

"But," said Rhoda blankly, "he is a reporter."

"Yes, yes, of course," Uncle William agreed uneasily at a sudden movement of impatience on Martin's part, "but I want to acknowledge that my momentary suspicion that his interest in you was heightened by his knowledge of the possibility that you might turn out to be, so to speak, an heiress, became grotesque as soon as I looked up what he spoke of on the way home as his references and learned that he had an independent fortune of his own."

She turned a bewildered look on Martin. He had a sheaf of yellow papers in his hand which he'd been holding ever since he'd got up to let Uncle William in, and giving at least half his attention to them. He forgot them now, however, long enough to come over to her and put an arm around her.

"It's nothing to bother about, darling," he said. "I wasn't keeping anything dark. I'd have told you if there'd been time. But there's always been something more important to talk about. As a matter of fact, there is now. Forster will be getting here any minute.—Rhoda, what was the date of your father's death? Do you remember exactly?"

She did and she told him.

He looked down at the papers again with an intensity of concentration that held them both silent.

After perhaps a minute he drew a long breath. "Look here, darling," he said. "Look at the date on these sheets. They're carbons, you see, of the last notes he ever made. See what he's written on the bottom of this page. It's the last page of all. 'Try this to-morrow. Think it's right at last.' Well, it *was* right. Those few hours he begged the doctor for were all he needed, but the doctor couldn't give them to him."

Down at the foot of the long flight of stairs they heard the street door open. Martin turned suddenly to Uncle William. "Have you got that contract with you, sir? Right here in your pocket, I mean? Because if that's Forster coming up the stairs we're going to need it."

Uncle William, speechless for once, felt in his pocket and nodded.

Martin went out into the entry and looked down the stairs. "It's Forster," he said as he came back into the studio. "Conley's carrying him up."

No one spoke after that and the wait while Conley struggled with his burden up those long straight flights of stairs seemed endless.

Forster, by the time he'd been deposited in a big chair, was as breathless and as nearly exhausted—with terror that he'd be dropped, most likely—as the man who carried him.

"Well," he panted, "I've come—on some fool's errand, I expect. I can't think of anything among the Professor's papers that I'd be especially interested in, now." But his look, darting rat-like about the studio, belied his words, and when it lighted upon the little hat trunk surrounded by the heaps of yellow sheets, it remained fixed, fascinated.

"I thought," Martin observed, "that you'd be interested in these notes. You must have seen something very like them before—in the laboratory just after Professor McFarland died."

"Possibly," Forster admitted. "I'd been financing him for four years while he was trying to discover an oil process. He died without getting anywhere with it. I hired another man and he discovered the thing almost at once. It was a very valuable discovery and I've made a great deal of money on it. The Professor didn't make it. He tried to and he failed. I don't believe that these papers you've got here are worth anything. But if they are worth anything and the Professor held them out, they're my property. He was working under contract with me and he had no right to hold anything out."

"He didn't hold anything out," Martin said. "There was nothing in that trunk that you didn't find the exact duplicate of when you took possession of the laboratory. And to put it the other way around, there was nothing among the notes in the laboratory that there wasn't an exact duplicate of in that trunk."

"What's that?" cried Uncle William, so sharply that Forster started in his chair.

Martin turned to Rhoda. "Don't you see how it

was? Your father safeguarded himself against the very thing that finally happened. During the whole four years that he worked in Forster's laboratory he kept a daily record, a sort of log, of everything he did, of his experiments, of his calculations, even his guesses as they occurred to him. He wrote them all down in tablets which had alternate pages that could be torn out, and he kept a carbon copy of every note and diagram, every pencil scratch that he made. Every night he brought home the dated carbon copies of that day's notes and threw them in that trunk.

"That's what he almost always did; ninety-nine times out of a hundred. But once in a hundred times it happened that what he brought home weren't the carbons but the original penciled notes. From his point of view it wasn't important which he brought home. He had with him in his personal possession all the time an absolutely complete record of all the work he had done, against the chance that Forster might some time try to beat him out of his dues.

"Well, he completed his process right up to the outline of the last confirmatory experiments. He had it right, at last, the day before he died."

"You can't prove that!" Forster snarled.

"You're going to prove it for me," Martin

answered, "within five minutes." Then he turned back to Rhoda.

"Forster had his process and he didn't doubt that he was safe in stealing your father's share of it. He made his deal and his contracts, collected his royalties. The probable existence of your father's copy of their contract didn't bother him a bit. He could say what he said to us just now and there was, he thought, no proof to the contrary. But at some time or other, not so very long ago I imagine, looking over the log that he'd found in the laboratory, he discovered here and there a carbon sheet in place of the original. And then he knew what your father had done. He knew that if these sheets hadn't been destroyed and ever fell into the hands of any friend of yours who recognized what they were, he could be forced to an accounting and made to pay every cent that the contract called for. When he realized that he began to advertise for the whereabouts of Rhoda McFarland."

Forster's face was shining with sweat but once more he bleated stubbornly, "You can't prove it!"

"I said *you* were going to prove it," Martin reminded him. "You have proved it to my satisfaction by coming here to-day. But I'll tell you what I'm going to do. If you insist that the process you are using

isn't Professor McFarland's process but something else, I'll publish these notes of his and make the world a present of them."

Forster sank back in his chair with a groan. "All right," he said. "I'll buy them of you. How much do you want?"

Martin turned to Uncle William. "I think we'll leave the price in money to the legal department," he said. "But Rhoda wants something more out of Forster than the money her father earned."

He paused an instant, then turned to Forster. "She isn't vindictive and she doesn't want any revenge. She won't prosecute you and your nephew's wife for conspiracy unless she's forced to. But she wants a sworn statement from you that to your personal knowledge her father was innocent of the California charges and that they were framed against him for the purpose of forcing him out of the university."

This time it was Uncle William who started to protest. "My dear Martin . . ."

But Martin cut him short. "The two go together," he said. "We'll accept a settlement if the sworn statement goes with it. Otherwise we'll publish the notes and prosecute for conspiracy. We want this thing cleaned up."

There was still some fight in Uncle William but Forster threw up the sponge. "All right," he grunted. "We'll get together next week on the settlement and I'll have my lawyer draw up a statement. I don't mind that. I never had anything to do with it. It was my scamp of a secretary who fixed up the whole thing, and he's dead." Then, to Conley, "Take me out of here."

But at the door just before Conley picked him up he seemed to feel that he had slighted Uncle William. Perhaps he recognized a kindred spirit. "My car is down here," he said. "You can drive back with me to the Worcester if you like."

"I didn't think, last night," Rhoda said after an interval, "that I could ever hate anybody as much as I hated Mr. Forster. But I hate Uncle William worse."

Martin admitted that there wasn't much to choose between them. "But they're both going to be good, now," he concluded.

"Not Uncle William," Rhoda insisted. "He didn't want Forster to agree to tell the truth about father. And if he does, Uncle William will try to suppress it. Why, Martin? Did he always hate father?"

"He probably didn't like him any too well, but that isn't the reason. He wants to suppress the truth be-

cause it will show that he made a ghastly mistake. It isn't malice; it's pure vanity. But he's going to have to scramble over the stile like the pig, just the same, and he'll do it without a squeal, too."

He spoke so confidently that she turned a sudden intent look upon him. "Have you thought of something else?" she asked. "Something you haven't told me about?"

"It was the first thing I did think of, but it wasn't any good until the rest of the plan worked out. It's something for you to do. You can do it as soon as Uncle William asks you how you want to invest the money he's got out of Forster. I don't know how much it will be but it's sure to be plenty. You tell him that the first thing you want to do is to endow a special fund at the university for chemical research. You'll tell him that there's just one condition tied to it, and that is that it shall be called the Walter Whitehouse McFarland memorial. That will settle Uncle William and all the rest of the scandalmongers. And it'll be news, too."

Rather soberly, as the dusk drew down to dark, they discussed the wonder of this prospect, and other wonders. They'd set off to-morrow, Martin said, on their honeymoon. They'd go to New York and when

they got ready they'd sail for Europe. Paris. The Riviera. San Moritz. They'd have a good long play.

"That's what father and I were always going to do," Rhoda said with a gasp, and Martin held her quietly and let her cry as long as she liked.

The jingle of the telephone brought them back to the moment. Martin switched on a light and Rhoda went to the instrument. It was Babe, he made out, and he'd have liked to hear all she was saying. Rhoda's report of it when, a little flushed and startled, she had hung up, was clearly condensed.

"Chicago won. And Babe and Ida Remington and two men are going to dinner together and a show. And Babe is going to stay all night with Ida.—And she says, why don't you stay here?"

"I'll do," he told her quietly, "whatever you want me to, darling."

"I want you to stay," she decided, a little shakily. "But, Martin, will you do something else? Something rather silly? After we've had dinner, will you take me to the Alhambra and dance with me a while?"

"Sure I will," he assented with a laugh, "if you'll agree not to let Leander Higgins cut in."

THE END

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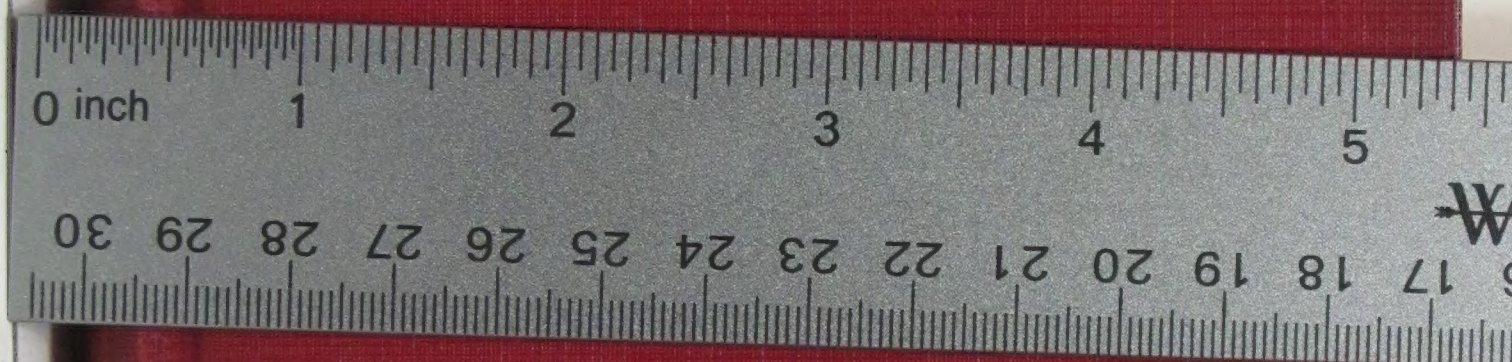
The Sealed Trunk



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